car

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2025
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NEW CARS 2026

FERRARI'S NEW 1035BHP TESTAROSSA
LEADS OUR EPIC ANNUAL COUNTDOWN

2026 HOT LIST

Freelander returns

Land Rover leans into China
to resurrect its baby 4x4

+

Electric A110

Think EVs should be heavy?
Alpine missed the memo

+

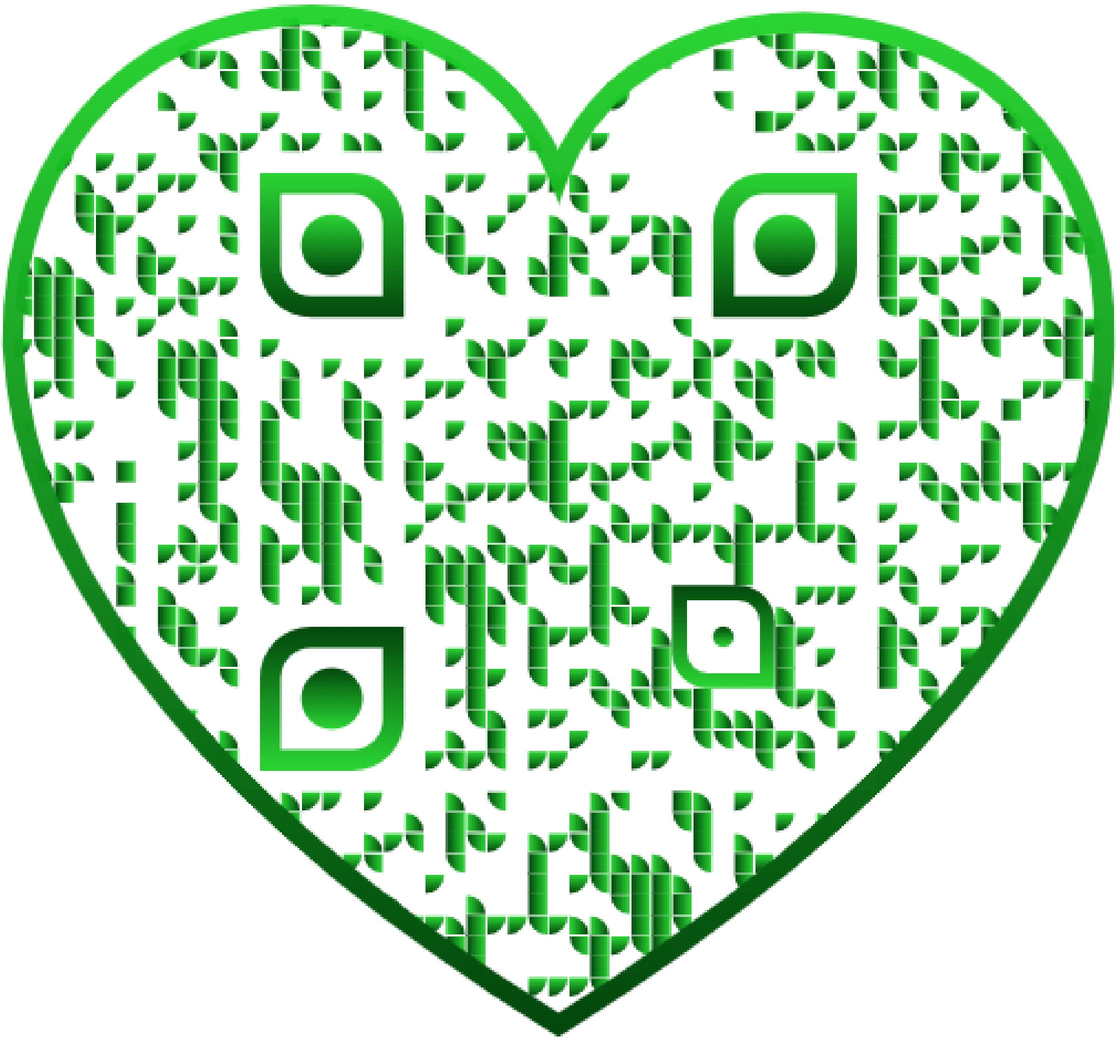
Taycan tormentor

Flat out in the new Polestar 5
aiming to outgun Porsche

+

New Delta HF

Rally icon is back, this time
with a battery. Is Lancia mad?



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hings up. Think of it like acci-
ly stumbling upon that hidden
easy everyone whispers about,
overing your grandma's secret
or world-class cookies. It's about
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thrill in the unexpected. It's
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Welcome

The idea that new cars are boring is nonsense

That damn clutch. For years I've searched high and low for a clutch bite point that's as satisfying to use as the one in the second-generation Ford Focus I learned to drive in. I've now been driving for 14 years – and lucky in this job to test everything from Dacias to Rolls-Royces – and yet I don't think I've ever found a clutch that was so spot-on. Hell, even the grotty Ferrari F355 GTS I nursed around a track aged 14 – thanks again, Mum – didn't feel as sweet as that hard-working L-plated Ford. It's become an embarrassing obsession.

The Focus, throughout its history, has been a benchmark of handling prowess, accessible to all. It helped that the first generation in 1998 looked as wild as it did; I remember seeing it at the NEC as a kid and couldn't get over how space-age it seemed. But what brought people back to buy consecutive ones was always how it drove.

Nuanced control weights were, for a long time, Ford's speciality. That clutch, that neat steering and strong brakes that bit early were perfect for communicating the feel of the road to a newbie like me – as well as the likes of my fiancé Ryan, who also learned to drive in one. Years of getting to throw Fords of all sizes around for work hasn't dented that opinion, either.

Sadly, though, times are changing at Ford, and the car that embodied so much that we like about Ford will cease production this year with no direct replacement in sight.

Another car that'll soon be going to the big farm in the sky is the Volkswagen Touareg. Completely different vibe to the Focus, but a car that has subtly shaped the landscape of the car market more than most of us have truly realised.

Silly and OTT it may have been in its early days, with its optional V10 diesel and 747-towing antics, but the Touareg – for better or worse – helped make the premium SUV accessible.

Honda's utterly incredible Civic Type R doesn't make it to 2026, either, and we (finally) say goodbye to the Nissan GT-R: an epic, giant-killing technological tour-de-force that originally went on sale just before the fall of the Roman Empire. At least I think that's correct – the records have long since been lost.

Plenty of reasons to be glum, then. But, if you look through our New Cars 2026 feature package, the world of cars isn't getting boring just yet. Plenty of old favourites like the Land Rover Freelander, Lancia Delta HF Integrale and Smart ForTwo are making a proper comeback. Superstars of the modern era like the Alpine A110 and BMW 3-series arrive next year with their rulebooks entirely rewritten.

And, before you grumble that everything is electric, we've got a few ferociously powerful V8s and high-revving jewels with at least 12 fire-breathing cylinders crammed in. Not to mention – just before we went to print – Porsche quietly confirming that its Boxster and Cayman twins due next year would no longer be electric-only.

The idea that new cars are boring is just nonsense. I don't think I've been this excited for the coming automotive year for a very long time. We're losing some true greats, granted, but the new generation of future heroes due next year should go some way to making up for it. Now is a great time to be a car enthusiast, because all our specific passions, interests and niche wants are starting to be catered for again after years of 'portfolio rationalisation' or cost cutting.

That said, maybe I should give up on finding a better clutch – I doubt anyone can do it better than Ford.

Enjoy the issue.

Jake Groves
News editor

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Enjoy our back issues

In this issue Jake Groves looks at Audi's 'new TT'. You'll find his history of the TT in the February 2023 issue, in Archive in the app.

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2026

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Tireless *CAR* video chief James Dennison also loves insanely powerful cars. Who better to host our Ford Mustang GTD video?

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ISSUE 760 | NOVEMBER 2025

54

Tomorrow's classics today: Lotus Emira, Porsche 911, BMW M3

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Agenda

6 Leading car designers help us assess the opportunities and dangers of AI

8 Silverstone was a laughing stock not that long ago. Now it's the centre of the F1 universe. How did that happen?

11 Four new cars that debuted in Munich

12 Audi reveals the concept that could turn into a replacement for both TT and R8

16 Porsche insiders explain their thinking about fake paddleshifts for EVs

18 The cars are good. The prices make sense. But what's the key to China's roaring success with EV sales? Dealers

20 Check out the profit margin on a Land Rover Defender and you'll see why BMW and others want to get a piece of the action. But will they really do it?

22 Top automotive executives have been changing jobs like never before. What are the challenges facing the people in charge in 2026?

24 If they're all built to the same rules, why do some cars have safety systems that are so much more annoying than others?

6 How AI can help designers explore strange new worlds

First Drives

26 The 300-Mile Test: Ford Mustang GTD – the hottest and by far the most expensive 'Stang driven on road and track

36 Kia keeps hitting the spot with its electric cars. Will the EV4 maintain that record?

38 Nissan's partnership with Renault means the Micra is a modified 5. Can it really be as good as the French original?

40 A new range-topper for Aston Martin's SUV: the brilliant DBX S

38 Isn't that a...? Nope, it's the new Nissan Micra

Opinion

44 Letters: no to the reborn Honda Prelude, yes to the electric Porsche Macan

46 Gavin Green: my amazing boss, RIP

58 Mark Walton: old Porsche pros and cons

123 GBU: the best cars in every class

90 We look ahead to the Spyder version of the Lamborghini Temerario

64 Mazda's brilliant but modest design chief talks to *CAR*

78 Gordon Murray's still full of surprises

The big reads

54 It's getting harder to buy a new car embodying your ideal combination of driver-pleasing qualities. So let's celebrate the greats while we can. Georg Kacher drives the Lotus Emira, Porsche 911 Carrera S and BMW M3

73 Smart circles back to where it all began

64 Without fuss or fanfare, Mazda has been crafting some great-looking mainstream cars. We meet the man responsible

72 New Cars 2026: we count down the 26 hottest prospects for the year ahead

76 Polestar 5 driven: the big, fast GT that will make you look at Polestar again

88 How Land Rover and Chery are teaming up to create a new electric Freelander

94 Porsche 911 Turbo S: the inside story of the fastest production 911 ever made

103 Ferrari 849 Testarossa: we meet the people behind the new car bringing back one of Maranello's greatest names

Our Cars

108 We say goodbye to our Renault Scenic – the un-retro, very good family EV

116 Skoda Superb meets its Volvo estate rival

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Agenda

Car makers like privacy, but AI gets better the more data it can access

Simon Loasby, Hyundai

DESIGN

How to design a vehicle in 40 seconds

Guy Bird Design expert

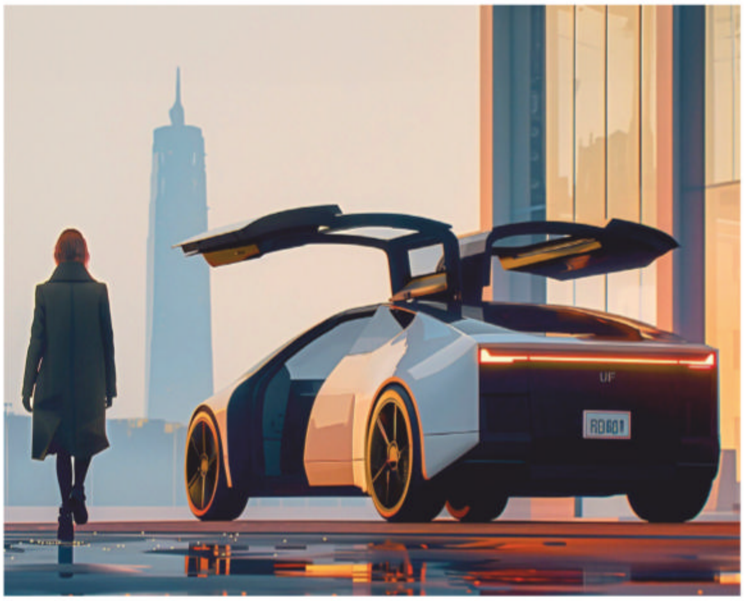
▶ **Can artificial intelligence better** – or even replace – human car designers? It's being used by design teams across the car world, although their perspectives on its effectiveness and prospects vary significantly.

Among those not shying away from exploring the possibilities is Simon Loasby, head of the Hyundai Design Centre. 'I remember showing a colleague some images I created on [AI software] Midjourney, and they were blow away by the result,' he says. 'Truth be told, it took me the distance from one set of traffic lights to the next when I was [being driven] into Seoul: about 40 seconds.' The 'vehicle' created in 40 seconds was not a car but a yacht he wanted to show a colleague in relation to design ideas around the Hyundai Ioniq 9. But it indicates the potential.

Loasby is far from alone in enjoying the novelty and speed of AI design software, while also engaging very seriously in questions of how to integrate it with the human-led creative process.

Robin Page, design director at Bentley Motors, says: 'It's great for things like wheels, components, colour and materials and influence boards. It's [also] good for the very early research phase, but then you need to create something new.'

AI used by experts created both these images



Brett Patterson

Mitja Borkert, design director at Lamborghini, says he was at first a reluctant experimenter. 'In the beginning I was a bit against AI. So far I'm playing around with it, asking it to create this or that and then defining and creating a complete picture. For me the designs that AI creates are a bit generic. The outcome is interesting sometimes, but there is nothing new.'

This lack of originality makes sense, given the way AI software works by searching for data based on the prompts it is given by a human – in this scenario trawling for existing designs already published digitally – and melding them into different variations. To some extent that is how human designers might also choose to work: study the look of an iconic model from the '70s, say, and use it as inspiration for a modern car's LED headlights. But when the focus switches from details to creating a whole new model, the consensus is that this requires an imaginative leap beyond the ability of AI.

Marek Reichman, chief creative officer at Aston Martin, says: 'I go back to Einstein's comment, "Knowledge is nothing without imagination." And AI is nothing without the imagination to use it. We can't ignore it. We have to enhance it.'

'We have embraced AI,' says Ralph Gilles, one of the two chief design officers at Stellantis. 'The difference is we're not "open sourcing" it. We have our own captive AI that uses basically the same tools, where we load it up with our own work, sketches and previous or live designs. Sometimes we'll load it up with our own brands and it'll help us mix ideas. It's almost like having an extra designer that may create something you wouldn't have thought of. The young designers love it.'

Privacy around intellectual property has always been a big issue for car manufacturers, who fiercely guard their future designs to avoid them being copied by rivals. That issue is complicated by AI, which gets better the more data it can access. 'What is clear is that the most powerful AI tools are "open source" platforms,' Loasby says, 'so for confidential stuff we simply can't use them. This leads us to develop our own internal company AI and to train it on content that guides it in our direction.'

Brett Patterson, an independent vehicle designer who used AI in the creation of the gullwing image seen here, believes AI has the potential to upend the process of design. 'Instead of cycles of rough ideation sketches leading to presentation renderings, now the "hero image" can be right at the beginning of the design process,' he says. 'And once a direction is chosen then the complete design can be fleshed out through sketches and modelling, using the more familiar design processes. Sketch-based AI tools such as Vizcom also allow designers to guide the AI using their own sketch examples or their brand's style.'

Will AI cut the number of human car designers? Possibly, but most heads of car design remain optimistic. Loasby says: 'AI isn't going to take over our jobs, but someone using AI will, so we must use the new tools.'

When it was bad, it was very bad

MOTORSPORT

How F1 fell in love with this swamp

Damien Smith Motorsport analyst

▶ **'It's a country fair masquerading** as a world championship event.' That's how Bernie Ecclestone described Silverstone, the so-called 'Home of British Motor Sport', in 2002.

Back then, 'Future of British GP in doubt' was a copy-and-paste headline for newspaper editors as Silverstone faced sustained (and often legitimate) shelling over its tattiness and the gridlocked state of its tardy traffic management on race days. Compared to the bright, shiny, state-funded mega-venues sprouting up in the Middle and Far East, Formula 1's original circuit based on an old Second World War airfield in the centre of rural England was considered a sorry anachronism – and a running joke in Formula 1 circles.

But no one is laughing at Silverstone now. In this post-

No one is laughing at Silverstone now in this post-Ecclestone F1 era peppered by crowd-pleasing Netflix documentaries

Ecclestone F1 era peppered by crowd-pleasing Netflix documentaries and a mainstream '*Top Gun* on Wheels' movie starring Brad Pitt, Silverstone has been transformed into an international motorsport 'destination' – a bustling hub that features not only a Grand Prix circuit considered among the world's best, but also a suave hotel and sophisticated Escapade trackside accommodation, a thriving and expanding business park, a carefully curated museum, even a university and now a kart circuit. The venue for the first F1 world championship GP 75 years ago would today be barely recognisable to the 100,000 patrons who turned out on 13 May 1950.

What sparked the turnaround? There's no short answer to that, within a labyrinthine tale of mismanagement and false starts stretching back at least 40 years. But Silverstone CEO Stuart Pringle, a key figure in the modern success story, draws a ring around 2009-2010 as the time when fortunes finally began to turn. That was when an audacious bid by Donington Park to claim the British GP rose and quickly evaporated amid a puff of hot air.

'The GP was lobbed back at Silverstone at short notice in 2010, and at that point we had to build The Wing to get a new F1 contract,' says Pringle, in reference to the now familiar pit and paddock complex built between the old Club and Abbey corners. 'It was the first seriously modern building at Silverstone, and was designed as a multi-functional space not just for race meetings but as a conference and exhibition centre.'

He adds that the original business plan around The Wing 'failed' – partly because of the lack of a hotel back then, but mainly because the multi-million-pound F1 deal Ecclestone demanded – complete with annual five per cent escalator – 'almost simultaneously bankrupted the business'.

Following a change of management in 2014, when the circuit-owning British Racing Drivers' Club took back executive control, the penny began to drop that a new strategy was required, not only to secure the future of the British GP but to finally allow the venue to thrive and develop. Pringle credits then-BRDC chairman John Grant for triggering the turnaround.

'John's idea was to use other people's money,' he says. 'For example, we needed a hotel, so we did a deal with a third-party operator because we didn't have the cash or ability to build one ourselves.' The 197-room Hilton Garden Inn now sits opposite The Wing and is linked by a signature walkway across the start/finish straight. Grant, Pringle and the Silverstone team also began to work on ensuring the business of Silverstone didn't revolve solely around the annual British GP.

Beyond the major developments within the boundaries of the race circuit, the most obvious transformation is what has sprung up in its immediate environ. The 285-acre business park, situated on land previously used as car parking, appears to expand with every visit. Again, 'other people's money' was used to develop the park, in this case property development and investment specialist MEPC. The approach to the circuit's main entrance is now dominated by cutting-edge new-technology businesses – and on the other side of the now four-lane Dadford Road (which used to be a country lane), Aston Martin's monolithic Technology Campus.

Working with the highways authorities, Silverstone has also vastly improved traffic flows, transforming the coming-and-going experience for spectators and minimising inconvenience for locals.

Britain's status as the centre around which the motorsport world spins has been well established since the 1960s, when British expertise usurped the pre-war powerhouses of Italy and Germany as the leading force in world motorsport. But it evolved independently of, arguably even despite, Silverstone.

The so-called 'Motorsport Valley' is a catch-all term for the UK's racing heartland stretching from Berkshire and Oxfordshire to Northamptonshire. Silverstone happens to sit at its heart – but now that's more than just a happy coincidence. When General Motors confirmed its intention to launch Cadillac into F1, there was little surprise it chose Silverstone's Business Park for its ▶

Silverstone

Bernie wasn't a fan; Pringle has led it to its current success

Aston F1 is among the big names that call it home

operational HQ. The growing popularity of F1 is clearly a factor in Silverstone's growth. Pringle offers full credit to the much-heralded 'Netflix effect' triggered by the *Drive to Survive* documentary series that has pulled in new and younger fans.

'We managed to capitalise on it better than most,' he says. 'What it's done is change the buying behaviour of customers, creating a fear of missing out.'

British GP attendance numbers have shot up, especially since the twin behind-closed-doors races held in the summer of 2020 during the Covid pandemic. This summer, four-day attendance hit the half-a-million mark for the first time. The high number of British drivers on the grid these days helps.

For years, there was a perception – fed in part by Ecclestone's criticism – that Silverstone was in a sorry state because of BRDC greed. The reality was the cost of running the British GP and the exorbitant promoter fees meant the circuit ran at a loss for decades. The corner into profitably was finally turned, ironically, just as the Ecclestone era was coming to an end around 2017, when US giant Liberty Media took the F1 reins.

At that point, Silverstone's management took a risk by triggering a break clause in its crippling F1 contract, forcing a renegotiation on better terms. Fortunately, Liberty recognised the value of Silverstone remaining on the F1 schedule and a new deal was struck, then extended for 10 years from 2024. The future of the race is finally secure – but the challenge of running Silverstone to an operating profit remains acute.

'We are now dealing with a legacy of 40 years of underinvestment in the structure of Silverstone,' says Pringle. 'The good news is the business is now consistently profitable. The amazing thing about the BRDC is it chooses to operate on a not-for-profit basis, and it puts almost all of what is earned back into the infrastructure for the good of all motorsport, including the grass roots and not just F1.'

Twenty-five years ago, Ecclestone and his old FIA president ally Max Mosley stitched up Silverstone by scheduling the British GP to run in April instead of its traditional July. Inevitably it rained, car parks turned into quagmires and the debacle almost cost the race its place on the calendar.

'The majority of Bernie's criticism was unwarranted,' asserts Pringle. 'I think it was commercial pressure. He read and played the BRDC very well. He knew a group of racing drivers would highly likely have their hearts rule their heads [on maintaining the British GP], and actually I'm very glad they allowed that to happen. If they had called his bluff he would likely have taken the British GP away from the UK, and then it would have been difficult for it to return.'

It's been a long road back from that lowest ebb. No one who experienced the mud bath of 2000 would have predicted what Silverstone has become a quarter of a century later. The old place has rebuilt its battered self-esteem, and the self-styled 'Home of British Motor Sport' soubriquet now actually fits. It's the envy of the racing world.

Trackside investment key to modernisation

NEW CARS

Postcards from Munich

Jake Groves News editor

Will be a real car

▶ **VW's new product offensive includes** two new electric Polos (see No.12 in our New Cars 2026 countdown) and a predictable crossover. The ID. Cross is a thinly-veiled look at the 'friendly' and 'familiar' design (read: Citroën C3 Aircross clone) of a new electric SUV that'll also launch in the summer of 2026. What's real is under the skin – front-wheel-drive electrical architecture, masses of boot space and the return of properly thought-out physical switches inside. What (probably) won't make it across from concept to reality is the eucalyptus hedge stuffed into the centre console or the bouclé yarn upholstery.

Might be a new car

▶ **Cupra designers love the Lamborghini** Urus. At least, that's what it looks like to us. The Tindaya concept is Cupra's largest vehicle so far, presenting us with a look at some new design cues that will appear on future production cars including the Raval supermini next year. Cupra says it has a focus on the driver, offering spicy dynamics as a priority rather than the autonomous ability that some others favour. Under the skin, the Tindaya uses the VW Group SSP architecture, with a range extender among the possibilities; this concept has almost 500bhp and a maximum range beyond 600 miles.

Is already a new car

▶ **One with optional scissor doors,** too. Ambitious Chinese tech firm Xpeng, which makes cars as well as robots and drones, has unveiled its next-gen P7 saloon. This thing will tackle the Porsche Taycan, Audi e-Tron GT and Polestar 5 when it arrives in Europe, expected to be next year. At its reveal event in Munich, boss He Xiaopeng confirmed it will launch with just under 600bhp and will do a sub-4.0sec 0-62mph time. The flagship Ultra model will get those Lamborghini-inspired front doors, but all versions come with active aero and, naturally, plenty of tech on board.

Might kill off existing cars

▶ **Risky business, this electrification stuff.** Skoda's top team, at the reveal of this Vision O concept car, admit they're considering a future merger of Skoda's two current estates, the Octavia and Superb. The Czech company's head of technical development confirmed to us that it's no coincidence that the concept sits between those two wagons in terms of length. Like the Cupra Tindaya, the Vision O concept uses the SSP platform, but in this case it's been revealed as a battery-electric car only. It comes with a full-width dashboard display and a clean (if slightly controversial) new look.

STRATEGY

Audi's hard reset is more than skin deep

Jake Groves News editor

RSQ, Rosemeyer and TT rolled into one

Concept C previews an electric sports car due in late 2027

▶ **'We have lost our way.'** Gernot Döllner, CEO of Audi, is resolutely blunt while on stage unveiling the new Concept C – a drastic design reset for the brand – right in the heart of fashion-focused Milan. 'We lost our clarity and, as a result, lost our character,' he continues. 'In a world where only quick wins seem to count, one insight is becoming blindingly clear: success is fragile.' But the Concept C signifies more than just a design reset.

Döllner has been in the top role at Audi for two years and has spent that time making sweeping, pivotal and sometimes difficult moves to cut waste and complexity, and to stop silly decisions being made before they can wreak any more havoc at Ingolstadt.

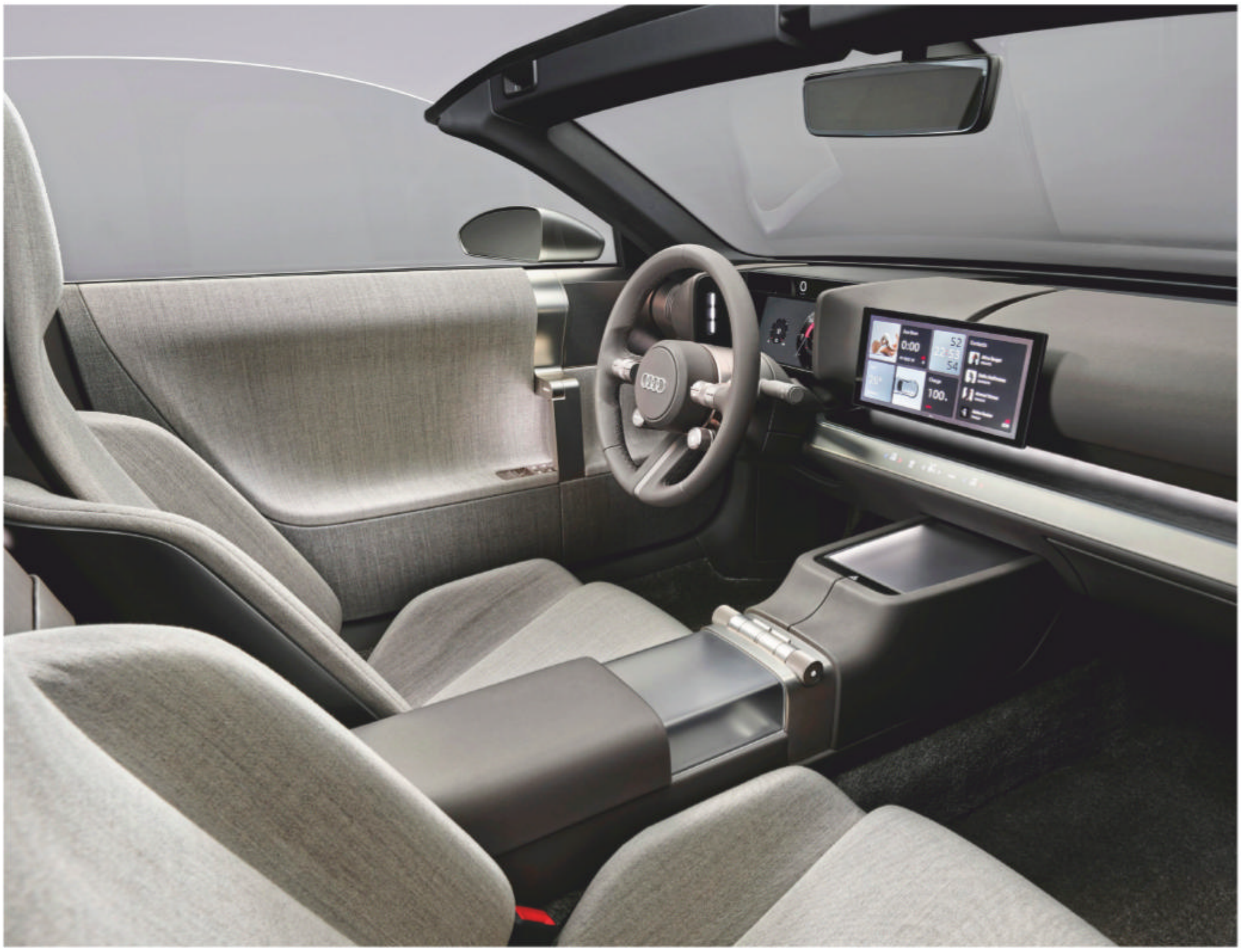
He's scrapped the naming strategy that gave seemingly random pairs of digits to different powertrains, and the short-lived plan for even-numbered model names to mean electric, odd for combustion. EV plans have been rationalised. Manufacturing has been streamlined – albeit at the significant financial and human cost of closing its plant in Brussels – and Audi will be the first brand within the VW Group to benefit from the investment in Rivian's software development.

'We're not only repositioning our portfolio, but the entire company,' says Döllner. 'We have an agreement that will secure €1bn in annual savings. We've reduced 20 per cent of the management positions and cut off 85 per cent of internal committees.' Those revisions are intended to speed up the decision-making processes.

As for Brussels: 'Closing this plant was one of the most difficult decisions I've ever had to take in my career, but it was a clear signal to ensure our long-term resilience.'

At the reveal of the Concept C, the buzz word is 'clarity'. Clarity in design. Clarity in decision making. Clarity in what Audi actually offers buyers. Something arguably long overdue for the Four Rings – and something the Concept C physically represents.

The Concept C is our first look at what Audi calls its Radical Next design language, which aims to reinstate a cleaner, more classic look that tips a wink-and-nod to the past without digging deep into it. 'Confident, courageous ▶



and understated – these three words truly describe what Audi is all about,' says chief creative officer Massimo Frascella.

Look around the car and you'll spot the nods: wheels from the Rosemeyer concept, a rear canopy like the RSQ that was used in *iRobot*, and shallow headlights that brim with technology from Audi's current production cars. Two of the biggest sources of inspiration, though, are the original TT and the Auto Union Type C. The Concept C's 'Vertical Frame' nose is a merging of the Type C's upright, multi-slatted grille and the 'Singleframe' shape that's been a staple of Audis for more than 20 years.

The TT – particularly the last generation before its retirement – has had the most influence over the Concept C's interior. It's extremely pared back and finished in a warm beige, allowing technical elements to really shine. Aluminium is used generously: the physical buttons on the skinny steering wheel, Type C-inspired air vents and fabulously well-crafted door handles, for instance. Frascella and his team have been primarily focused on the haptics of the interior, striving to give each interaction a proper, tangible click.

In a departure for Audi, the Concept C employs the idea of 'shy tech'. It's all there, but hidden when it's not needed, or blended seamlessly into the design. A radar system can, if you squint, be seen through the glass panel of the Vertical Frame, and the central infotainment screen slides away under a fold in the dashboard.

Design chief Massimo Frascella's had a huge hand in shaking Audi to its core, but says it was needed

Ulrich Beierlein, head of interior design architecture, says the new Radical Next philosophy 'has been a wake-up call', adding: 'If you want to make a good product for human beings to actually use, then don't overwhelm it.' Fewer design elements means much more focus on getting every single one of them right first time. 'For designers and technical engineers, it's much harder to kick something out than put something in,' adds Beierlein. 'If you reduce it, you have to execute it in a perfect way because you will see every mistake.'

Frascella's had a huge hand in shaking Audi to its core, but says it was needed. 'It's a profound transformation for our business, and it feels like the right moment to think about who we are and convey our values,' he says. 'What I did in the first few months here was spend time discussing this – what are the things that make us who we are?'

Frascella says the design department has been given a much more direct line to Döllner than before, helping the creative team ensure the Radical Next design vision doesn't become corrupted in the run-up to applying it to production cars. 'Moving design from the technical

development and engineering area to report directly to the CEO is the first signal, at a business level, of the importance of design,' says Frascella. 'But moving a box from one place to another is easily done. The most difficult thing is changing the mindset.'

And that all counts for nothing if the funding isn't in place to deliver the new look and the new way and thinking. Some of the design elements of the Concept C – like those aluminium-hewn door handles – may be commercially difficult to justify when manufacturing volume models.

But Frascella doesn't seem worried: 'Everyone recognises that design is important now – it's a voice that is heard loudly within the company. There's also a lot of common intent to deliver [on the concept's promises], and we make decisions collaboratively with engineering. With our overarching strategy, there is an alignment [between design and engineering] from the beginning.'

Frascella calls the design language 'scalable,' as he and his team get to work creating production models, pointing to many elements of the Concept C being easily translatable onto, for instance, a next-generation A6 or large SUV. Before then, we may see the Radical Next philosophy have some influence on cars that are already nearing production – like the next-generation Q7 or the upcoming Q9 due in a year or so.

But Frascella suggests we don't get our hopes up too much. 'As we go through the development stages [of cars that are already in the production pipeline], we will see what we can do next,' says Frascella, 'but I would say the first car that truly represents the new philosophy is going to be the production version of this concept.'

That is slated for a late 2027 arrival and is expected to be Audi's sole sports car – merging the TT and R8 into one electric model. It'll almost certainly take advantage of the battery-electric architecture being developed by Porsche for its electric Boxster and Cayman, meaning tri-motor configurations and power beyond 500bhp. After all, Porsche has to get a return on that heavy, protracted investment somehow…

Concept C's drastically simplified design is just the start

INNOVATION

Fake gearbox, real thrills: ePDK is coming

Ben Miller Editor

▶ **When you're discussing the new** Cayenne Electric's quasi-V8 sports soundtrack with model line VP Michael Schätzle, the two of you speeding across sun-scorched Spanish roads in a prototype version of his new baby, the next question is obvious: would Porsche ever consider a Hyundai N-style simulated paddleshift gearbox?

'We are always trying interesting things,' replies Schätzle, 'and I think it [a simulated paddleshift on an EV powertrain] might be a good fit. Have you driven the Hyundai? It's really well done. We also tested it in the new Cayenne. Will we put it into series production? We'll see.'

Drive the Hyundai system, dubbed N e-Shift, and it's easy to see why Porsche felt compelled to explore the technology. On the road, the system adds a level of engagement absent in most EV powertrains, its synthesised engine noise, physical shift sensation and deftly modelled power curves lending the car more grit and character. Torque builds with revs before tailing off right at the top end, as it does with a combustion engine, before a non-existent rev limiter calls time at the 'redline'.

On a circuit, the system helps you learn the layout and evolve your lines and braking points, the shifts a string of breadcrumbs with which you mentally map each lap.

Such a system would be nice to have on any electric Porsche, but the upcoming electric Cayman and Boxster are the obvious cars with which to debut the technology in production guise. Those cars, more than any other engine-less Porsche, will succeed or fail on the richness of the driving experience. They're also the most likely to be driven on track.

'The Cayenne Electric's V8-inspired sound – you might describe that as a gimmick,' explains Sascha Niesen, Cayenne verification and validation manager. 'When they drove it, they told us it felt really good. It's the same with the gearshift in an EV.'

Niesen points to the good work these systems do in helping drivers understand the car as it moves, simulated sounds working as an early warning system as the tyres' limits are breached. BMW M boss Frank van Meel has long discussed this challenge – of the need to give EV drivers something they can hear and feel to help them understand where the limit is.

'I was driving the Cayenne in Sweden, on snow and ice, and for the first time I could hear what the grip situation was at the wheels – I had that acoustic feedback,' says Niesen. 'When the wheels started slipping the revs went up. Usually you don't have that with an EV. EVs are easy to drift on snow but usually you don't have that feedback.'

How does Niesen – as a gears and pistons man through and through – feel about Porsche faking this stuff? 'When I first drove a car [the Cayenne Electric] with the gearshift concept, I wanted to hate it,' he admits. 'I'm a mechanical engineer, right? But it turned out to be great. I was anxious that the people working on it would be software geeks trying to simulate the feel of a gearbox. But no. The people working on it were actual powertrain and gearbox people. It just felt authentic, and I felt engaged.'

Up the electric creek with a paddle

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Dealers have helped wavering browsers to commit

SALES TRENDS

China's secret EV weapon: proper dealers

Gavin Green Contributor in chief

▶ **The names may be unfamiliar,** the styling occasionally challenging, and the EV tech is constantly evolving. But the buying experience couldn't be more normal. It's a crucial – and often ignored – element in how cleverly Chinese car makers are expanding into Europe and, especially, the UK.

In June, one in 10 cars sold in the UK came from Chinese brands. Most were EVs. In the first six months of the year, the figure's more than eight per cent – up from five per cent last year. That compares with 4.3 per cent across the EU. The UK is responsible for 30 per cent of all Chinese car sales in Europe. Thirty per cent of all EVs sold in the UK are Chinese.

Why is it working so well in the UK in particular? Lower UK tariffs are a factor, and so is our lack of a strong

They are run by experienced dealers with strong local connections, happy to recommend these new brands to friends and acquaintances

indigenous industry to protect. There's also the strange phenomenon of China's number one UK car brand MG playing like a local, never mind that it's owned by a Chinese state-controlled car maker.

The ambition is huge. China's most prosperous car maker and EV market leader BYD expects to be the number one name plate in the UK in 'three years', according to its UK boss, Bono Ge. It was the fastest growing car brand in the UK last year. So far this year sales have risen four-fold.

The Chinese manufacturers have been helped by some of the brands that used to sell in big volumes withdrawing from mainstream segments, as they try to move upmarket. Ford has dropped its one-time top-seller, the Fiesta, and soon stops making the Focus. Instead, it concentrates on more profitable commercial vehicles and pricier name plates like Explorer, Capri and Mustang. Vauxhall is also scaling back.

This leaves a gaping hole in the market that the Chinese companies are delighted to fill. It also leaves prime dealer sites empty and desperate for product.

The big Chinese players are courting the major dealer groups and the best family-owned retailers. The high streets and car retailing parks of the UK increasingly house MG, BYD, Leapmotor, Omoda and Jaecoo showrooms. They are run by experienced dealers with strong local connections, happy to recommend these new brands to friends and acquaintances. The dealers have the customer relationship, not the car maker.

Says BYD's Bono Ge: 'The traditional dealer model helps us to sell cars. We partner with retailers who know their customers and have a great local network and local familiarity.' This contrasts with other EV-focused brands such as Tesla, which sells direct to customers through its own network of stores or online platforms, and Polestar, which tried a similar model but has now taken a more conventional path.

'The dealers know the market,' says Ge. 'They know the customer needs. They help us to learn faster. We also want to be in mainstream locations, where other OEM brands are available, and where established dealers operate.' Initially, dealers introduced BYD to new customers who had never heard of the Chinese brand. Now, the level of unprompted familiarity approaches 50 per cent: last year's sponsorship of the men's football Euros saw a big uplift, says Ge. Battery-electric vehicle buyers are also more likely to know about BYD than those in search of engines.

Many big dealer bodies have BYD franchises, including the family-owned Hendy group, which has a string of retailers across the South Coast. MG was its first Chinese brand. Now it has BYD, and shortly Jaecoo and Omoda.

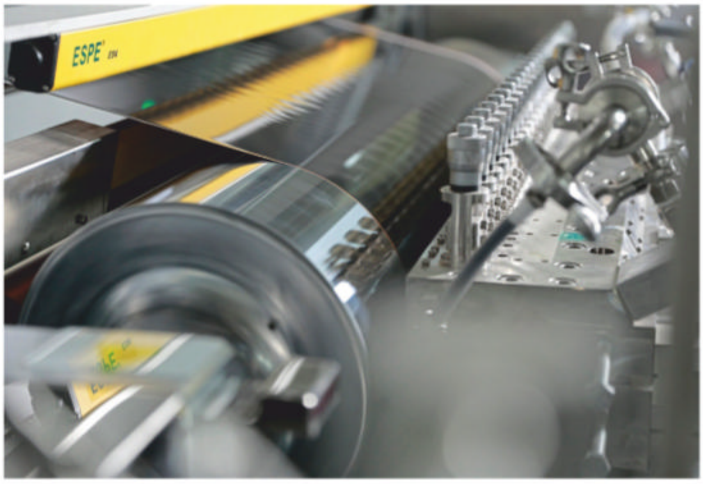
'All big dealer groups look at their representation and question whether it's fit for the future,' notes Mark Busby, commercial director of Hendy. The appeal of selling Chinese cars such as BYD is clear. 'They are good products, priced well,' says Busby. 'The way they're growing suggests they're going to be dominant players in the future. You can really sense the high energy levels. And it's true of customers, too. When we opened our BYD dealership in Tonbridge, I'd never experienced such a level of inquiry.'

World-class design and tech make the sales chat easy

Of course, the Chinese car makers are hardly the first new market entrants to sell partly on low price. Lada, Proton and Daewoo, and many other makers, have tried that before and failed. But they only sold on price. As well as low labour costs and long working hours, the Chinese firms add advanced technology, increasingly high quality and very deep pockets.

'We own the supply chain, and that helps to develop new systems faster,' says Bono Ge. 'We have 120,000 engineers – the biggest R&D team in the automotive industry – and that speeds development.' That in turn cuts costs and gets fresh tech to market sooner. Such rapid development is now common in China, and by comparison the Europeans are, as Ge succinctly puts it, 'a little bit slow'.

Or, as a senior European engineer working for rival Chinese car brand Chery recently said: 'Global car makers have no idea what they're up against.'



Where you'll never see a BMW X8, ever

TRENDS

BMW joins the Defender gold rush

Ben Oliver Contributing editor

▶ **In January, a decade will** have passed since Land Rover killed off the original Defender. But in that time, old-school off-roaders with ladder frames, live axles and diff locks have not been swept away by the rising tide of bland Chinese EVs, as some feared they might. Quite the opposite.

BMW is the latest car maker to develop a proper mud-plugger, its first since the 1930s. Referred to internally as 'Project Rugged' or the G74, and likely to be badged X8 when it appears in 2029, the seven-seater is aimed between the Defender and the Mercedes G-Class. Power will come from an internal-combustion engine at first. An old-fashioned ladder frame would be too retrograde a step for a brand with no recent history of using them, so the X8 will share the CLAR platform with the X7

It's all about money. The Defender is a riotous success, accounting for nearly a third of JLR's 375,000 annual production

(pictured), among others, but adds three locking diffs and air suspension capable of big articulations.

'Don't think of it as a Defender rival,' a BMW insider told us, not entirely convincingly. 'Think of it as a rugged BMW SUV. There's a demand for it. People want a tech detox. But don't expect a Defender silhouette.'

The Defender and the G-Class are far from its only rivals. There's the deliberately rudimentary Ineos Grenadier, of course. Volkswagen subsidiary Scout will launch an SUV and pick-up with body-on-frame construction in the US in 2027. They'll be cheaper than the Defender, but Audi CEO Gernot Dollner told *CAR* he'd like to pinch the Scout platform for something pricier, which would give all three German premium marques a model in this space.

The Scouts will compete directly on price and concept with the Ford Bronco introduced in 2022, and with Jeep's Wrangler and Gladiator. The Toyota Land Cruiser had a recent retro reboot, and even the Chinese car makers are getting involved: the Great Wall Tank and Yangwang U8 are both proper off-roaders with body-on-frame construction, and the U8 can even swim.

The metric by which to measure these cars isn't the number of diff locks. The Grenadier is most stubbornly off-roady of the lot, to the detriment of its road manners, but an Ineos insider told us that customers in the US, its largest market, 'are not using it off-road in reality, at all'.

Instead, it's all about money, of course. Last year, JLR made a profit of £2.5bn, its best in 10 years. That's largely down to the riotous success of the new Defender, which is now its biggest seller by a country mile, accounting for nearly a third of its 375,000 annual production. The G-Class is recording its best quarterly sales in its 46-year history, has been outselling the S-Class in the US, and has an average transaction price of around $200,000 to the big limo's $131,000.

This formerly basic truck conceived for military and agricultural use is now Merc's de facto flagship in its biggest market. Mercedes makes over 40,000 Gs each year now, and a profit of well over half a billion dollars on them.

The flip side of this is that sales of big luxury saloons like the S-Class and Audi A8 are slumping: the 7-series seems to be bucking the trend for now but its long-term prospects are similar. The manufacturers have known for years that they need to replace those sales, but until now they thought that it would be with ever bigger and more luxurious but wholly road-optimised SUVs. They'll still need those, of course, but more hardcore off-roaders need to be part of the mix. You might be cynical about Ineos's chances of reaching sustainable volumes, but selling 10,000 highly polarising SUVs in the US each year from a standing start is a sign of the appeal of such cars.

More rugged off-roaders also attract wealthy customers who may well drop another hundred grand on something else while they're in the dealership. Priced from $71,000 in the US, most Grenadiers end up costing over $100,000 with options, are bought with cash and go into garages with three or four other cars. Research from US consultancy Strategic Vision puts the average household income of S-Class buyers at $425,000, but for the G-Class it's $826,000.

But why do we want trucks like this at all? Maybe it's just the same psychology that tempted people out of standard cars and into SUVs in the first place. The size, the image, the view out and the feeling of security and omni-capability are addictive. Offer more of that and you'll tempt some buyers out of standard SUVs, even if it comes at a cost to road manners, and feels a bit military.

And what about the real OG, ladder-frame, indestructible off-roader? The Toyota Land Cruiser 70 series is one of the oldest vehicles in continuous production, one of the hardiest ever made and spectacularly cool. It's just been reintroduced to Japan, which shows it can be made to meet modern crash and emissions standards. But otherwise it's only sold in Australia and some developing markets to people who actually need its abilities.

Come on, Toyota. There's a lot more money to be made from selling a luxury version to people who don't.

It won't be the first German alternative to the Brit icon

Renault boss Provost shuns his predecessor's flamboyance

EXECUTIVE RESHUFFLE

The golden rule for 2026: be less Musk

Nick Gibbs Industry analyst

▶ **After a frenetic reshuffle in** recent months in which some of the more flamboyant and rule-busting automotive CEOs have been ousted or left of their own accord, the ones chosen to replace them are all about preventing disruption, not creating it.

Bosses like Antonio Filosa at Stellantis (replacing Carlos Tavares), François Provost at Renault (stepping into Luca de Meo's designer shoes), Håkan Samuelsson at Volvo (taking over from Jim Rowan), Ivan Espinosa at Nissan (the new Makoto Uchida) and PB Balaji at JLR (about to take over from Adrian Mardell) have all been promoted from within.

Porsche is also rumoured to be looking for a new CEO after Oliver Blume's combined role, also overseeing the VW Group parent company, was put into question by

To storm-proof their companies from the worst threats, they have to know where the tarps and fire extinguishers are kept

Porsche's recent poor performance. 'The business model, which has served us well for many decades, no longer works in its current form,' Blume warned Porsche employees in a July letter.

Executive committees are picking dependable generals from the ranks. No more poaching from rivals or even unrelated tech companies (eg Rowan, who came from Dyson). The job is storm-proofing their companies from the incoming threats. To do that you have to know where to find all the tarps and fire extinguishers.

We're a long way from the optimism of 2021, when EVs, software, direct sales and a host of other Tesla-sourced ideas were predicted to juice the balance sheets. Tesla, it transpired, was a terrible role model in many ways.

'I don't think any of the CEOs are comfortable,' Andrew Bergbaum, global automotive lead at consultants AlixPartners, told *CAR*. 'They're dealing with multiple fires.' The location of those fires will vary, but top of any list will be tariffs if you've got a US footprint, plummeting market share in China for anyone with a remaining business there, and stagnating sales in Europe, with the added pain of increased Chinese competition.

'You're dealing with the polarisation of the industry now, because the US is a very, very different place to China, which is a different place to Europe,' said Bergbaum, a former Aston Martin executive.

How you, the new CEO, approach the task will depend partly on whether your predecessor jumped or left under a cloud. For Provost at Renault the job is to assume the mantle of de Meo following his big-money signing to Kering, the parent company of Gucci. 'My strategy is based on continuity,' the former head of purchasing, partnerships and public affairs told journalists at the Munich motor show. As with most companies, the job at Renault is to cut costs and speed up development to track the Chinese, the biggest threat to its sales in markets like the UK, Spain and Italy.

Antonio Filosa's job at Stellantis, by contrast, is to be the anti-Tavares. Whereas Tavares went all-in with wild promises like €20 billion of software-generated revenues by 2030, Filosa is axing some of the more buoyant predictions and reviving cancelled or delayed launches in the US, in a wind-back of the planned EV transformation.

Espinosa at Nissan, meanwhile, is facing the reverse problem – too many cars to sell as a result of his predecessor's fairly desperate attempt to stem Nissan's volume shrinkage. In response he announced he would close seven of the company's 17 plants globally and axe 11,000 jobs. 'Our fixed costs are higher than our current revenue can support,' Espinosa said.

For Samuelsson, his return to the hot seat coincides with a fragmentation of the markets as rising barriers prevent easy shipping between regions. Essentially he's creating three Volvos – one for the US, one in Europe and a third in China. 'We are creating much more empowered regions,' Samuelsson said at the *FT* conference earlier this year, patting himself on the back for having the foresight to open a US plant during his first stint in charge.

JLR is a tougher one. The announcement that Tata Motors chief financial officer and all-round Tata Group stalwart PB Balaji will take over in November follows the pattern, in that it's an internal promotion, but JLR is a very different animal to the parent company's budget-focused Indian operation.

Given that JLR's profits are being eroded by all the global undercurrents, even before the devastating hack, Balaji might just want a closer look at the books. 'It's a harbinger of tighter Tata financial control as the firm enters choppy waters around the shift to EVs, Trump tariffs etc,' David Bailey, professor of business economics at the Birmingham Business School, told *CAR*.

If there was a manual for the new automotive CEO approaching 2026, it would contain a mass of contradictory advice: increase profits while also discounting to push volume; match Chinese development speeds but don't drop quality; cut costs while offering EVs, hybrids and combustion-engine cars; follow the Chinese EV trend while planning for a possible future right-wing-led bonfire of environmental targets. Good job they're paid well.

Samuelsson's got his old job back; Blume's got one too many

Visual, haptic, audible: and not all compulsory

SAFETY

Why some cars just love nagging

Nick Gibbs Industry analyst

▶ **Warning bongs have become a** part of life for every motorist driving a new car. They're compulsory, so you have to put up with them, right? Except you then switch to a different new car and the scolds are different. What was worthy of a digital klaxon in one might go unnoticed in other. Hang on: if both cars conform to the same legislation, how come the warnings are different?

It is – you won't be surprised to learn – complicated. The requirement for warnings is down to a combination of laws and threats. The big one is GSR2 (General Safety Regulation, part two) mandated by the European Union and applicable since 2022 to all but small-selling niche models. It includes requirements to warn of drowsiness and distraction, as well as keeping the vehicle from straying out of its lane. Also on the list is advanced

Some manufacturers offer a programmable button that lets the driver use it to turn off various warning bongs with a single push

emergency braking, intelligent speed assist (where the car theoretically knows what the speed limit is) and a reverse parking camera or sensors.

GSR2 came into force in July 2022 for all freshly launched cars and July 2024 for all cars sold as new, so that in itself created a discrepancy. A car homologated for sale in June 2022 wouldn't need the active safety requirements of a car that went through the same process a month later. Or it might have them but not apply the worst of the nagging until forced to two years later.

In the UK, having left the European Union, we aren't signed up to GSR2. But in Northern Ireland we sort of are still in the EU, and anyway the manufacturers are grumpy enough about having to spend money to shift the steering wheel to our side without needing to reprogram the safety set-up as well.

'The cost of a manufacturer having to maintain a UK-specific set of software from the rest of EU is just not worth it for them,' Yousif Al-Ani, principle engineer at the UK's insurance-funded vehicle testing centre, Thatcham Research, tells *CAR*.

And then there's the 'advanced driver distraction warning' that all newly launched cars have had to include since July 2024. That requires the manufacturer to fit an eye tracker that monitors how long your gaze leaves the road. Again, cars launched before that date have a two-year grace period. This one doesn't have to beep at you: the GSR2 rules state that the inattention warning could be haptic, eg a vibration through the steering wheel. But a buzz or bong is cheaper so that's the most common.

From 2026, Euro NCAP – the other main generator of safety requirements aside from the EU – will allocate a whole 25 points to monitoring driver drowsiness and inattention instead of the current two. That means car makers will be strongly focused on keeping the scorers happy in their quest to hit five stars, although it must be said NCAP is looking to reward systems that actually work properly, for example without the infuriating lag that's all too familiar.

Rules are one thing; implementation is another. And it's often poor implementation from certain manufacturers that results in counter-productively distracting warnings. One of the most enraging technologies is intelligent speed assist (ISA), which works by scanning road signs as well as referencing a speed-limit database to warn you when you're exceeding the maximum. This has the potential to be useful, but too often misreads the signs. The rule is that the system must be accurate 90 per cent of the time. But that remaining 10 per cent isn't spread geographically evenly.

ISA rules also allow a speed percentage tolerance, meaning it can be set to chime for example at 32mph in a 30mph zone and still be legal. 'That's one example where you can do a small thing as a manufacturer that can actually get rid a lot of driver dissatisfaction,' Al-Ani says. Some manufacturers also pick more annoying sounds for their warnings than others.

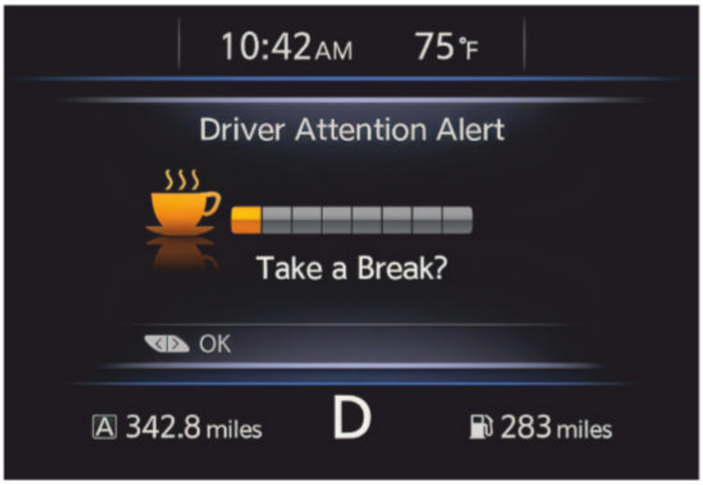
The other flexibility comes in how you turn them off. EU legislation states that all systems must be on when the car is restarted and can't be turned off with a single button press. However, manufacturers including Mazda and Renault have found that if they offer a programmable button, the driver can use it to perform a single push to turn off warning bongs without falling foul of the law.

Those who draft the laws mandating safety technology obviously hope you mute the bongs by complying with their requests, rather than by switching the tech off. That has largely been the case with seatbelts, which have had a compulsory audible reminder since 2014.

And when the integration has been done seamlessly, few even notice, let along complain. Mandatory electronic stability control came in at the same time at seatbelt warnings and has now matured to the point where few us now feel the need to turn it off at the start of a journey.

Manufacturers have different philosophies about this whole field. Some are focused on the next phase, self-driving tech, which will make today's status quo seem pretty low-tech. But another camp, led by Renault and Stellantis, is pushing back against the greater requirement for active safety, citing spiralling costs.

At least it's keeping graphic artists busy



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Driver Attention Alert

Take a Break?

OK

342.8 miles D 283 miles

First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER

The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

FORD MUSTANG GTD

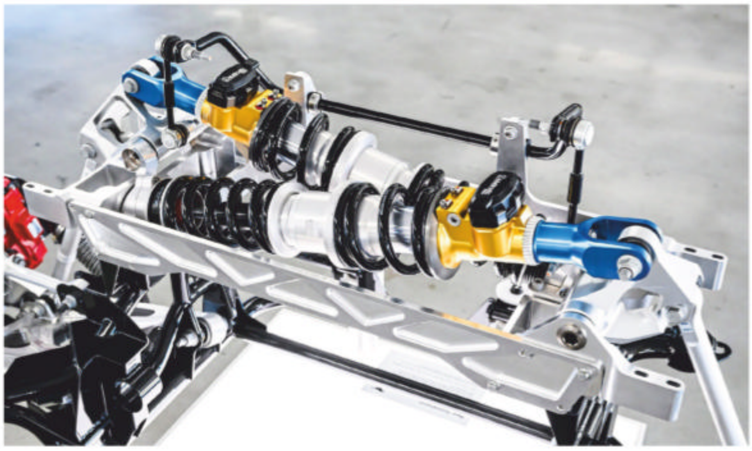
Sledgehammer of the gods

The fastest and most expensive Mustang ever is enough to make even a Porsche 911 GT3 RS look a bit sensible

Words James Dennison **Photography** James Lipman

In America's wide open spaces it almost makes sense

MUSTANG
GTD
104M321
MANUFACTURER



A shot (top) to inspire a new generation of suspension engineers

At first glance, nothing looks out of place. Bleached and broken by the torrid heat, an arrow-straight section of I-10 highway stretches out as far as the eye can see, its relentless form broken only by the shimmering of the distant horizon. In the right-hand lane, a 30-tonne semi loaded with cargo bound for New Mexico rumbles on. To its left, a Ford Mustang – a two-door symbol of the American dream. V8, front engine, rear-wheel drive – all present and correct.

Or not. Because while the Ford Mustang GTD is in the same lineage as the 1964 original, this iteration has made its name not in California or Detroit, but a small town in the Eiffel mountains some 50 miles south of Cologne.

In May 2025, the GTD set a Nordschleife lap time of 6min 52sec – less than three seconds off the Porsche 911 GT3 RS. Ford muscle cars usually lap the 'Ring in times beginning with eight, so it raises the question: is the GTD even a real Mustang?

If you're forking out the £315,000 asking price, you'd hope what you're getting is more than a stripped-out racing car whose soul bears little resemblance to the legendary name. Anyone can make a track car, but only Ford can make a Mustang, right?

To find out, we're taking a GTD on an extended drive through the Colorado desert (which, confusingly, is in California), taking in the San Jacinto mountains and Mecca Hills Wilderness, finishing up at a motorsport resort where millionaire F1 champions go to wind down (and turn in a few laps in the off season).

But first, some awkwardly British weather. Palm Springs, California is our starting point and, we're told, it averages less than two days of rainfall a year. A perfect desert oasis, they said. Bring your Speedos, they said. Cue thunder, lightning and the sort of rainfall that has the city's wildlife lining up two by two.

Leaping into the car for shelter, there are two immediate surprises. One, there's no boot – thank the unique rear subframe, transmission cooler and inboard Multimatic Dynamic Suspension Spool Valve semi-active dampers for that. And two, the cabin changes are far less radical.

There's some new trim, a few extra buttons on the flat-bottomed steering wheel, gearshift paddles made from titanium salvaged from old F-22 fighter jets (God bless America) and no rear bench. But what's also absent is a rollcage and proper bucket seats – the sort of thing Porsche doesn't think twice about fitting to the 911 GT3 RS. These absences are unlikely to be down to manufacturing or cost restraints. While the GTD starts its life on the same production line as other Mustangs in Flat Rock, Michigan, it's hooked aside at the body-in-white stage and sent to Multimatic's facility in Markham, Ontario. That's the same Multimatic that helped create the last Ford GT.

Rumour has it Ford is considering offering a rollcage option on the GTD further down the line, but for now the Recaro seats and relatively plain cabin speak to the desire to retain road ability in what is otherwise a track-focused car. However, as we squirm out of the car park and head towards the I-10, whirling grey skies showing no sign of a reprieve, there's a contradiction on this front.

The tyres – Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2 Rs – have been specifically developed for the GTD and, at the time of writing, are the only rubber available for the car. The 325/30 20-inch front tyre is the largest Michelin has ever fitted to a sports car. Great for sunny track performance, but what about wet-weather, everyday driving?

The man from Michelin is at pains to point out that ▸

Pick-up: 0 miles

First impressions are that the cabin looks like, well, a Mustang. Lots of space, but also lots of Ford parts sharing – difficult to swallow at £315k. Hmm...

9 miles

Recaro seats don't look that exciting, but they're comfy on-road. It took Ford 17 months and 20 different iterations before settling on the final design.

16 miles

Michelin started tyre development for the GTD three and a half years prior to launch. Brilliant in the dry, but wet-weather performance was never the aim.

MICHELIN
345/30 ZR 20

Rear wing, along with front flaps, stars in active aero

the Cup 2Rs pass every safety test going, but also acknowledges they're only just acceptable in the rain. This thought is looming large in my mind as we squirm onto the interstate, rear tyres struggling to deal with the small matter of 815bhp. Don't forget, the GT3 RS is now available with rain-friendly Pilot Sport S 5 tyres and, from an everyday-use point of view, it's a mark down for the Ford.

However, as we cruise by yet another sign offering up world-class ambulance chasing for 'no-fee guaranteed', it's clear that in every other respect the GTD has its rival from Stuttgart licked for usability. Comfort, refinement and flexibility from the 5.2-litre supercharged V8 – they're all superior in the big Ford.

And when I say big, I mean it. For some the size is going to be an issue. At 2080mm (164mm more than a regular Mustang) it's wider than a GT3 racing car, but given Ford designed the chassis first (with the ideal tyre size included), the width of the body was a secondary consideration. In the UK, it might be a bit much. Out here, on these usually wide and often empty roads? No problem.

And while a European test that began in these conditions could easily have been a wash-out, the beauty of driving in California is that, while it might be monsoon conditions in the morning, the blazing heat (42°C) means water can and will dry out in just a couple of hours. And not a moment too soon. Given the rubber, the GTD has acquitted itself reasonably well in the rain, but as we approach Box Canyon road south of Coachella, we have a lot of making up for lost time to do.

It's here that, finally, the GTD gets a dry corner between its teeth. Not a tight one – those are few and far between around here – but a constant-radius left-hander. Drive ▸

WATCH THE VIDEO!
GET *CAR'S* DIGITAL EDITION – SEE PAGE 62

It's low, but mostly it's wide. Very, very wide

25 miles

Hit the setting on the infotainment screen and the car holds the front brakes while you stand on the throttle. The result is impressively smoky.

36 miles

Big landscape, not so little car. Quite how the GTD will handle the B-roads and car parks of the UK is something to worry about another time.

62 miles

There's no denying it, the GTD has presence. Especially in America. It's like driving around in Bruce Springsteen, such are the responses you get.

It's wonderfully approachable – far more so than the looks suggest – but the extra weight is hard to ignore

79 miles

I may or may not have nearly veered off the road while looking at the Multimatic dampers through the rear-view mirror. Doubt I'll be the last to do that.

112 miles

This car gets attention. I lose track of how many times I get asked to floor it down the highway. Even just stopping for a coffee is a difficult task.

145 miles

Box Canyon. Often filled with convoys of ATVs. The GTD is quite a contrast to their tinny motorbike engines reverberating off the rock.

Engine and brakes are amazing on track. It's heavy, though

Normal enough up front, but there's no rear seat and no boot

The sound is the low roar of an indignant dragon hell-bent on finding out who's stolen his breakfast

mode flicked into Sport (Normal and Track are your other primary choices), I lean on the standard carbon brakes (a first on a Mustang) and pitch the GTD in with a degree of caution, not entirely sure what to expect.

In fact, there's a meatiness to the steering that feels absolutely right for this car – it weighs 1989kg after all (around 460kg more than a GT3 RS). Not much feel, but enough to let me know that the huge front tyres barely register my tepid entry speed.

I crank on the power – it's too early to exit the corner but the perfect opportunity to work the chassis. Even with only a mild build-up of heat in the Cup 2 Rs, there's a deep reserve of mechanical grip from the front end. As a baseline, the on-road balance is exactly where you want it to be.

Accelerating away from the sandy barren flatlands just off the main road, we dive into the metamorphic canyon complex – a direct result of the adjacent San Andreas fault and the destructive power within.

Twisted strata tower high above us, their layered pale exteriors – eroded, yet ingrained in the landscape – telling a story older than time itself. Down on the stony smooth road surface, we're traversing a perfect pathway along the surface of Mars… and on this occasion, we definitely do not come in peace.

The sound of the Mustang's V8 is shattering. It's not a high-pitched cry like its European counterparts, but the lower, louder roar of an indignant dragon hell-bent on finding out who's stolen his breakfast. Add a subtle but noticeable supercharger whine and you've got an all-timer of an engine sound bouncing off the surrounding rock and creating a symphony in the arena of sand.

Why exactly did Ford eschew turbos or hybrid for a honking great V8 that does 10mpg? Well, if you have to ask… 'If we wanted a V8, we don't have any V8s in the line-up that have turbos, and there's no way we were going to put a V6 in it – we would have probably pissed too many people off,' explains Anthony Colard, design manager at Ford Performance.

'The supercharger was a better solution than a turbo because it's a little more progressive. And the goal is that this is not a one-off. We want some of the knowledge, some of the learnings from this to trickle back down into production cars for future years. We're not just doing this once for the fun of it.'

And as brilliant as the engine is (and trust me, it is), credit also needs to be given to the gearbox. An eight-speed dual-clutch Tremec transmission in a transaxle configuration, it helps deliver that perfect 50:50 weight distribution and rattles home surely the best shifts you've ever experienced on a 'Stang. It performs the everyday slushmaster role perfectly, but the moment you ask for more it delivers – big time. Perhaps Porsche's finest PDK attempts are a touch faster, but there's little in it.

With the sky now well and truly clear of clouds and matching the Lighting Blue of the GTD's paintwork, we exit the canyon at the northern end, hang a left past Cactus City and point towards our final stop in Thermal. In the bright daylight, the GTD has real presence, even by Mustang standards. Flared arches, a carbon bonnet with huge twin cut-outs, louvred wheel wells and aero hardware aplenty, even in a country where Mustangs are 10 a penny this one stands out.

Back on the highway, I lose count of how many locals pull up alongside, phone in hand, asking me to accelerate up through the gears. The responses are emphatic, ▸

PLUS

Incredible engine; easy to drive (in the dry); packed with character

MINUS

Cabin isn't £315k worth; weighs nearly two tonnes; left-hand-drive only

155 miles

America's road network is over four million miles long. And while much of it is straight, there are some wonderfully curvy pieces of tarmac.

162 miles

Makes little difference on road, but at 180mph the GTD produces up to 885kg of downforce. That's 25kg more than the 911 GT3 RS delivers at 177mph.

180 miles

Nürburgring time grabs the headlines, but the GTD is about so much more than numbers. It's got greater character than almost anything else on sale.

SET+
SET–
MODE

bordering on infatuation. Hell, a white Chevrolet Silverado almost rear-ends the car in front, so keen is the driver to hear that supercharged goodness. Forget Ferraris and Koenigseggs, big Ford V8s are the key to getting people going out here.

Off the I-10, onto the 111, past the seemingly infinite rows of date trees (the Coachella Valley is responsible for 90 per cent of the USA's date production, around 35,000 tonnes per year) and into the Thermal Club, the GTD is now – in theory – right at home. For those unacquainted, this 5.1-mile circuit is like an American version of Ascari. With a variety of layouts and up to 26 turns from high-speed sweepers to third-gear hairpins, it's the perfect place to find out just how far Ford has taken the Mustang GTD.

One particular setting on the steering wheel gives some indication. Flick the drive mode selector into Track and a number of things happen. Engine, gearbox and exhaust settings are optimised, while variable traction control also activates. More importantly, the car's ride height drops 40mm at the front, 30mm at the rear, plus one of the two springs on each damper is hydraulically compressed to nearly double the spring rate for greater control.

This in turn works with the active aero, whereby the rear wing and front underfloor flaps can open or close to manage drag and keep the centre of pressure balanced. The drop in ride height alone should make a huge difference. Sadly – due to unforeseen circumstances beyond our control – we aren't able to sample Track mode on track and instead make do with Sport in the higher ride-height setting. Even so, the braking – both stopping power and feel from the pedal – stands out, as does the glorious linearity and sheer punch of the engine. It's a sledgehammer, sure, but the GTD wields it like Michelangelo.

Clawing out of a long-left hander, there's a sense – in this drive mode at least – that the GTD requires more patience than a GT3 RS. It feels wonderfully approachable – far more so than the looks suggest – but the extra weight is hard to ignore. Whereas the Porsche is more of a handful, it needs no second invitation to settle mid-corner and get set for the exit. The GTD is, ultimately, less incisive. While the choice of drive mode is crucial, my feeling is that ultimately the additional weight also plays a significant part in this.

We'll have to wait to find out how the GTD fares on track in its intended settings, yet even when hobbled with a higher ride height and softer suspension its proposition feels no less attractive.

Honestly – who expected it to be a better, sharper track car than the Porsche? Weissach does it so well, after all, and the last thing you'd want from a Mustang is a carbon copy of the brilliant, but also strait-laced, GT3 RS.

No, the GTD is something entirely different. It's loud, ludicrously lairy in the wet, drinks like a fish, goes like a torpedo and sounds like nothing on earth. In short, it's no GT3 RS, but it's everything you could possibly want from the ultimate Mustang… and more. **car**

Data

PRICE
From £315k (approx)

POWERTRAIN
5163cc 32v supercharged V8, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
815bhp @ 7400rpm, 664lb ft @ 4800rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph (est), 202mph

WEIGHT
1989kg

EFFICIENCY
12mpg (est), n/a g/km CO2

ON SALE
2026

RATING
★★★★☆

Next month

FERRARI 296 SPECIALE

JUST HOW SPECIALE IS IT?

The GTD has real presence. Even in a country where Mustangs are 10 a penny this one stands out

KIA EV4

It's all just so EV

New hatchback is another very impressive electric Kia

The Kia EV4 is another example of the South Korean brand's continued efforts to cover just about every base in the mainstream car market. It's showing no signs of abandoning petrol power just yet, but the EVs are coming thick and fast in every shape and size.

This latest one is – underneath – very similar to Kia's current smallest and cheapest electric model, the EV3 (they share the same E-GMP platform). The key difference is a lower overall height (by 85mm), lower centre of gravity and a driving position that sits 40mm lower. That enables the EV4 to fill a space in the highly competitive electric hatchback market and cater to those who aren't so insistent on a 'commanding driving position'.

And while such changes have not transformed Kia's C-segment SUV into a hot hatch, the overall drive is laced with a little more polish. There's an inherent quality to the ride and refinement, but activate Sport mode on the steering wheel-mounted selector and you're presented with a peppy, eager chassis that feels like it could easily take more power. And that's exactly what it will do when Kia launches a dual-motor model further down the line.

For now, though, the 201bhp unit is enough. Performance is refreshingly brisk yet not needlessly neck-breaking, with 0-62mph in just under eight seconds, while total range on our GT-Line car is a claimed 362 miles, with the onboard efficiency reading suggesting around 10 per cent less during normal driving. Opt for the base Air spec and this official figure increases to an impressive 391 miles.

You get a nicer cabin than in many of its rivals. The EV4 puts its best foot forward in GT-Line trim upwards (the UK structure is Air, GT-Line and GT-Line S), showing off two-tone artificial leather upholstery and customisable ambient lighting, as well as useful kit like a wireless phone charger, electrically adjustable driver's seat and digital key functionality.

Kia EV interiors are all smart, modern, fresh

It's not all perfect. As with the EV3 there's still the design oddity of having a touchscreen climate display that's blocked by the steering wheel, but shortcuts to the main screen and physical buttons to adjust the temperature mean it's only a small issue.

Thankfully, the amount of available cabin space is anything but small. The EV4 gets the same wheelbase as the EV3, so rear-seat legroom is vast. It's so big that Kia offers two new interior modes – Rest and Theatre.

The former utilises fold-flat front seats in the GT-Line S model, as well as specific climate and ambient lighting settings to create the perfect place for sleep, while the latter makes use of onboard streaming services to create a four-wheel movie theatre (while the car is parked, of course).

There's a highly usable boot with greater capacity than the VW ID. 3 and Vauxhall Astra Electric. That said, the EV4 is the first electric Kia to not feature a frunk for extra storage space. No word yet on Euro NCAP scores, but expect the EV4 to get the same five stars as the closely related EV3.

JAMES DENNISON

First verdict

Another Kia that combines practicality and pleasure in a stylish, modern package, backed by a massive warranty

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

2 minutes
Flush door handles feel super fancy on a family hatchback

12 minutes
Bright, airy, packed with tech. Thumbs up for the cabin

22 minutes
Rear-facing side mirror cameras are so useful for blind-spot checks

43 minutes
Why did the scarecrow win an award? He was outstanding in his field. (ChatGPT joke from the car)

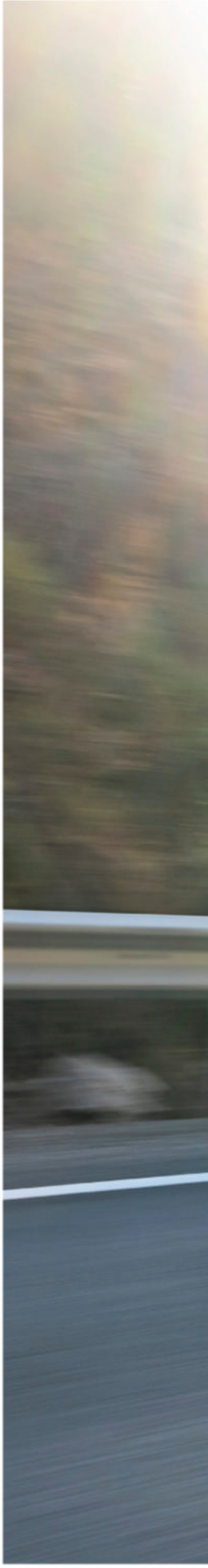
57 minutes
Charges at a max 135kW. Not bad, but not exceptional

PLUS

Good to drive; plenty of space; long range; seven-year warranty

MINUS

Longest range is only on base Air trim; pointless climate touchscreen



Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
From £34,695 (£39,395 as tested)	81.4kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive	201bhp, 209lb ft, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph	1910kg	3.9 miles per kWh, 362-mile range, 0g/km CO2	Now

The changes haven't made it a hot hatch, but it's refreshingly brisk

Lower than the EV3, but similar under the skin

It shares the 5's fun feel in the bends, with well-weighted and quick steering

Slightly more slippery than the very similar Renault 5

NISSAN MICRA

Nice to have the choice

As good as a Renault 5 in all the ways you can measure

You've got to feel a little sorry for the new Micra. While Nissan's sixth-gen supermini technically improves on the Renault 5 formula – with steering-wheel paddles to easily tweak the multi-stage regen and a moderate increase in range thanks to more slippery aerodynamics – the Micra seems to be stuck in the 5's shadow.

On paper, it's all good. You can have a 40 or 52kWh battery with up to 260 miles of WLTP-certified range and there's a choice of three trim levels. Pricing ranges from just under £23k to nearly £30k – almost identical to the 5. However, unlike the 5 there are some optional extras available on the Micra, so you can enjoy heated seats without having to shell out for the top trim.

Externally, many of the body's panels are slightly different, and the ring-shaped front and rear lights evoke the popular third-gen K12 Micra from the early 2000s.

Inside, the changes are subtler: different upholstery, reskinned infotainment and a few Mount Fuji-shaped Easter eggs dotted around. It means you get an interior with just enough plushness to make it feel better than bargain basement, and lots of buttons and switches.

It also means a stalk-heavy steering column, with plenty of potential for the occasional wipe of the windscreen when you're trying to engage reverse, but I can live with that. Infotainment is taken care of by a Google-based system that looks different to Renault's yet has much the same menu structure. That means it's easy to navigate, responsive and looks good.

Changes to the mechanicals are easy to list; there aren't any. That's a very good call, as one of the 5's strengths is how it drives, and the Micra is no different. On the road it feels tightly damped, with enough initial squidge to round off pimples and potholes. A Citroën e-C3 is a comfier choice in the class, although the Micra is a lot less punishing than a Mini hatch.

Badge and paddles are unique to the Micra

The Micra shares the 5's fun feel in the bends, too. Quick and well-weighted steering helps key you into the road, and the chassis can back that up. Strong grip and minimal roll make twisty roads enjoyable, if not quite as riotous as an equivalent Mini. There's a big-car feel on the motorway, too.

Efficiency on test was an impressive 4.2 miles per kWh on a mix of roads in the Netherlands (so they were all flat). That's enough for a calculated range of 218 miles in perfect weather conditions. A heat pump is standard, yet our experience with the 5 suggests 3.5 miles per kWh is more likely in winter on a similar mix of roads. That's still 182 miles of range for the big-battery model; the smaller 40kWh battery pack will officially do 198 miles.

Foot space isn't great. The shape of the battery encroaches into the footwell, forcing your feet forwards, and if front passengers have their seats in the lowest position then you'll only get your toes underneath.

Even so, the Micra is every bit as good as the 5 and therefore deserves every one of its five stars. That said, I know you'd rather have the 5 and so would I.

ALAN TAYLOR-JONES

First verdict

Technically better than the Renault 5 on which it's based, but arguably not quite so desirable

★★★★★

THE FIRST HOUR

3 minutes
More body changes than expected. The roofline screams 5, though

4 minutes
No vibrant fabric inside, but not unpleasant at all

11 minutes
Immediately you start to drive it feels identical to a 5. This is not a problem

28 minutes
Reskinned Google-based infotainment system is way better than anything Nissan's done before

52 minutes
Regen paddles are a welcome addition, allowing you to 'change down' as you approach a corner

PLUS

Enjoyable to drive; efficient; user-friendly interior and boot

MINUS

Tight rear foot space; it just isn't as cute as the 5

	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
Data	From £22,995 (£29,865 as tested)	52kWh battery, single-speed automatic, front-wheel drive	152bhp, 181lb ft, 8.0sec 0-62mph, 93mph	1542kg	4.2 miles per kWh, 218-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2	Now

The alterations are immediately obvious and brilliant, bringing an extra purity to the steering

Great here. Great on back roads. Great on motorways…

ASTON MARTIN DBX S

Aston's cuckoo

Arrival of the superior S at the same price spells trouble for the 707 version of Aston's SUV

On the face of it, Aston Martin's pricing for the new DBX S seems daft. At £210,000 it costs exactly the same as the 707 – the only other DBX currently available – yet it gets more power along with enough engineering and design tweaks that you'd think Aston could charge thousands more and it would still be everyone's preferred version.

Dig deeper, though, and you start to see some method in the madness.

The headlines are thus: 717bhp (up 20bhp on the 707), new design elements, Apple CarPlay Ultra (also available on the 707) and a 47kg diet. Except all the weight-saving measures, which are crucial to making the S perform so well, are optional extras. Get them all and you find the price has gone up by £42,350. And that's when it must start to make financial sense for Aston Martin.

Much like the Lightweight pack for the Porsche 911 GT3, the optional extras will be vital for bragging rights and resale value if you ever decide to sell it on, so everyone is going to tick the box. Tempt them through the door, then upsell, upsell, upsell…

Whereas the 707 badge always needed a bit of explaining (power output, measured in metric horsepower), the S badge is so familiar that it makes immediate sense on a sportier version of anything. It's been used at Aston on and off for decades, dating back to 1953's DB3S racer, then more recently with road cars including the Vanquish S from 2004 and various DBSs.

Those changes in detail, then; the components that make it an S and not a 707. The engine remains the same AMG-sourced, bi-turbo V8 as you'll find in the 707 (and other Astons), only this time with a larger compressor wheel and a more free-breathing exhaust system to reduce the back pressure.

The torque curve is also flatter above 4000rpm, which brings a bit more drama in the upper echelons, but the total torque output remains the same as the 707 (664lb ft). So, despite the extra power, the ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

4 minutes
Steering on these magnesium wheels is magnificently pure

6 minutes
Single button turns off the speed-sign bonging, and can be configured to disable more

18 minutes
Southern Spain is scorching today. Air-con and vented seats have to work hard

25 minutes
Short motorway blast shows the DBX S can also do comfort. Nine-speed auto helps drop revs back

51 minutes
Grip levels are mighty. Long downhill hairpins present no problems

PLUS

Incredible balance of ride and handling; still the best-looking performance SUV; same money as less powerful 707

MINUS

Gearchanges occasionally lurch; expensive options

Side sills are a single piece of carbonfibre

ASTON MARTIN
NI6 DBX

Spot the vertically arranged exhausts: only on the S

Cabin mostly unchanged, but with new embroidery

> **The changes all help make it a car that blends comfort and handling as well as any**

0-62mph time is still 3.3 seconds. Get on the autobahn, though, and the additional power makes more of a difference, reducing the 0-124mph time by 0.3 seconds.

Downshifts from the nine-speed automatic transmission are now more aggressive in Sport and Sport+ modes, while the steering has been made five per cent faster. Handily, this also shrinks the car's turning circle by half a metre without having to resort to four-wheel steer.

Aston isn't against that technology in principle but chief engineer Andy Tokley says it's not something he favours in heavier cars like the DBX. Because you have to insert bushing in the toe links at the rear, it introduces too much flex, he says. 'It leads to a double response [from the chassis] and we didn't want that.'

The design hasn't changed much and that's no bad thing – why mess with what remains one of the best-looking SUVs? Detail buffs will need to note the vertically stacked exhaust pipes as one of the bigger clues that this is the S, along with the new black-vaned grille. The grille is also available in lightweight polycarbonate, which is a marketeer's way of saying plastic.

The other dieting items are the magnesium wheels (saving 5kg a corner and costing £15,000), the carbonfibre roof (saving 20kg) and various other carbon bits including the sills and diffuser.

At the risk of sounding overly effusive, the lightweight alterations are immediately obvious and brilliant, because the magnesium wheels shed so much unsprung mass, bringing an extra purity to the steering. Not since the McLaren Artura have I experienced a system that brings the car to you in such an instantaneous and visceral way, with zero corruption through the wheel. The DBX S flows around bends beautifully, staying flat and true, and giving the driver complete confidence in its cornering ability.

That's helped by the grip levels, which are mighty and almost never-ending, only vaguely starting to give up on tight, downhill corners where the outer front is really loaded up. Like the 707, the S uses the same triple-chamber air springs that yield multiple spring rates and combine with Bilstein dampers, where Aston's engineers can separate rebound and compression. There are also active anti-rolls bars front and rear.

Carbon roof replaces panoramic glass version

Porsche has ditched triple-chamber air springs in favour of twin, claiming damper tech has moved on to such an extent it can achieve the same with less. But you can't argue with Aston's results.

What it all adds up to is a car that blends comfort and handling as well as any. I was in the Bentley Bentayga Speed recently, a car clearly aiming for the same breadth of ability but falls short; in trying to match the way the DBX twists and turns, Bentley has ended up making the Bentayga less comfortable.

Married to this chassis is an engine that will obliterate any horizon, riding on a wave of torque and power that defies the 2.2-tonne kerbweight. Rivals like the Lamborghini Urus, with its plug-in hybrid assistance, might push out more power, but no DBX owner is going to be disappointed. The exhaust in Sport+ belches and pops in all the right places – although it's tamer than the optional Akrapovič pipe in the Bentayga Speed – and settles back in GT mode when you need to pick your gran up.

Any criticisms? There's an occasional lurch from the gearbox where it drops into the next cog with too much of a bump, upsetting what is otherwise a smooth transmission. And I don't like the way it seems to float a bit at the rear over a mid-corner bump, giving the sense that the rear wheels aren't exactly tracking the fronts.

Tokley tells me that it's as a result of trying to reach a compromise with handling versus comfort, never easy in a car of this size and with this versatility.

It is a mighty impressive machine and makes the 707 feel like the poorer sibling. I can't see why anyone would pick the lesser car now – not for reasons of one-upmanship but because it's the better car.

PIERS WARD

First verdict

One of the finest-handling SUVs gets more power and even better handling, and keeps its fine looks

★★★★★

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£210,000 (£252,350 as tested)	3982cc 32v twin-turbo V8, nine-speed auto, all-wheel drive	717bhp @ 6250rpm, 664lb ft @ 3000rpm, 3.3sec 0-62mph, 193mph	2245kg	20mpg, 320g/km CO2 (both est)	Now

Opinion

MAX VERSTAPPEN + RETURN OF THE PRELUDE + E-MACAN

Are the Panda's fuel figures a bit retro?

Letter of the month

Two steps forward

I was interested to read the stats of Fiat's latest baby, the Panda Hybrid, in the First Drives section of your August issue. This is a small car with a tiny 1.2-litre engine and a 28bhp electric motor that will stagger to 62mph in 10 seconds before eventually topping out at a breathless 99mph. Fine, it's a little hybrid hatchback that is focused on economy and emissions.

Except... let's take a look at its official fuel consumption figure of 56.5mpg – and being an official figure, it's going to be 'generous'. And check out the CO2 emissions figure of 115g/km.

Compare that with my decade-old Mercedes C200 with its turbocharged 2.0-litre engine that will whisk quietly to 62mph in 7.3 seconds on its way to a top speed 4mph shy of 150mph, all while basking in a (comparatively) large and comfortable five-seat saloon car that is roomier, quieter, more comfortable, more refined, better equipped and with a boot 20 per cent larger. (I knew keeping the old brochure would pay off eventually!)

The official combined fuel consumption figure for my fat old low-tech Mercedes is 53.3mpg, just five per cent less than the little Panda Hybrid, and the emissions figure is 123g/km, just seven per cent more. Remember, that's for a relatively large and fast executive saloon that's a decade old, versus the latest cutting-edge hybrid hatchback. Emperor's new clothes...

Nick Burnham

It'll be interesting to see what figures Panda Hybrid owners get. We're used to the WLTP numbers being over-optimistic for hybrids, but this could be an example of the opposite problem. CO

Pioneer spirit

Reading the article about the Lotus Esprit at 50 in the July issue brought the memories flooding back. I am lucky enough to have owned four Esprits during the '80s and '90s, including Essex No12 (bought for £12,000, sold for £11,000!), and what fabulous cars they were.

CAR actually played a part in me buying the Essex, as you ran a competition in the early '80s to win an Esprit Turbo (those were the days!) and I came so close to winning it that I went out and bought the Essex to console myself.

How times change: in the day people scoffed at the Esprit's turbocharged small-capacity four-cylinder engine, while lauding the multi-cylinder competition. Now, 50 years on, the rest of the world is finally coming around to the Lotus way of thinking.

Lotus seems to be facing an uncertain future in the UK at the moment; but there again when wasn't it? I wish it well.

Patrick Limming

Lotus Esprit invented the future, sort of

Less haste

I read Greg Bale's letter in August's *CAR* by a hotel pool near Verona, having driven from London in our Jaguar i-Pace. It took us four days, by choice, and Greg's got it spot-on about the joys of taking a bit more time on the journey.

If we'd been in a tearing hurry, we wouldn't have followed in Sherlock Holmes' footsteps at the Reichenbach Falls, paid homage to Sean Connery's pursuit of Goldfinger on the Furka Pass nor stopped for a swim in Lake Lugano while the car charged up.

The stream of UK-registered insanity flying past us on the way back to the Eurotunnel had us baffled. It's always delayed from the French side, and the terminal's not that exciting.

Malcolm Williamson

Going fast for fun is one thing. Going fast because you're in a hurry is something quite different, often in a bad way. Setting the alarm earlier generally fixes it. CO

Mac and chips

I'd like to be the person swimming against the tide by singing the praises of the Porsche Macan EV. Mine is five months and 6000 miles old, and so far it has been a flawless and remarkably enjoyable ownership experience.

An awful lot of people were ready to tell me this was a bad idea. They'd tell me I would only get half the official range, when in fact I've averaged 3.8 miles per kWh and 350-plus miles on a charge, even though I drive in a spirited manner, generally with the sunroof open.

They'd tell me that public chargers can't be relied upon, when in fact I've never had any problems, even on long trips, thanks in part to Porsche's brilliant app, and I find that charging from 20 to 80 per cent takes less time than drinking a cup of coffee. They would also tell me the insurance would be expensive, but it isn't for me, and depreciation will be bad; we'll see, but so far values are holding up well.

My car is the base single-motor, rear-wheel-drive version. It handles

Cows, sheep and V12s in perfect harmony

remarkably well for an SUV, rides comfortably (on 20-inch wheels and standard suspension), is fast, exceptionally refined and is fun. It's the perfect bookend to my 911.
Richard Wright

Dreamy two-car garage. BM

In the crossfire

Excellent Agenda piece in the September issue about Max Verstappen, and how he seems to have been misunderstood and under-appreciated. That might sound like a ridiculous thing to say about a three-time world champion, but fans and close observers of the sport may well admire his achievements without feeling any attachment to the bloke.

Clearly this is not a season that will add to his total of world titles, but he's handled himself well when so many of the people around him seem to have lost sight of the fact that it's a sport, and meant to be fun. I'm not saying that the bad feeling between his father and the now-departed team boss was the reason for his disappointing results, but it can't have helped.

Anyway, he emerged from your article sounding like a serious racer, completely committed to motorsport, which was good to hear.
Pat Roberts

Preludicrous

I let out a bitter little snort when I read your piece about the Honda Prelude in the First Drives section of the September issue. *CAR* has always been oddly kind about the Prelude, I guess initially because LJK Setright was such a fan. But to my mind it was always a nothing kind of car, that may have looked quite good in some iterations, but which never drove particularly well.

Just get a Civic, with proper room in the cabin and generally better pricing too. The VW Scirocco and Corrado always seemed to pull the same trick off more effectively.
Will Farnham

Sublime, ridiculous

Ferrari normally-aspirated V12 versus Aston Martin turbo V12 versus Lamborghini hybrid V12, followed by seven reasons to love V12s – this is why I buy *CAR* magazine! I was genuinely buzzing with excitement, imagining the feeling and sound of these incredible cars.

Then I turned the page and the next article in the August issue was about an electric muscle car with fake exhaust noise. It was like someone had let the air out of my 315mm rear tyres. An emotional high immediately followed by despair about the future. I don't think I've ever experienced that emotional swing reading a magazine before. Brilliant writing… but I wish the articles had been the other way around.
Neil Faulkner

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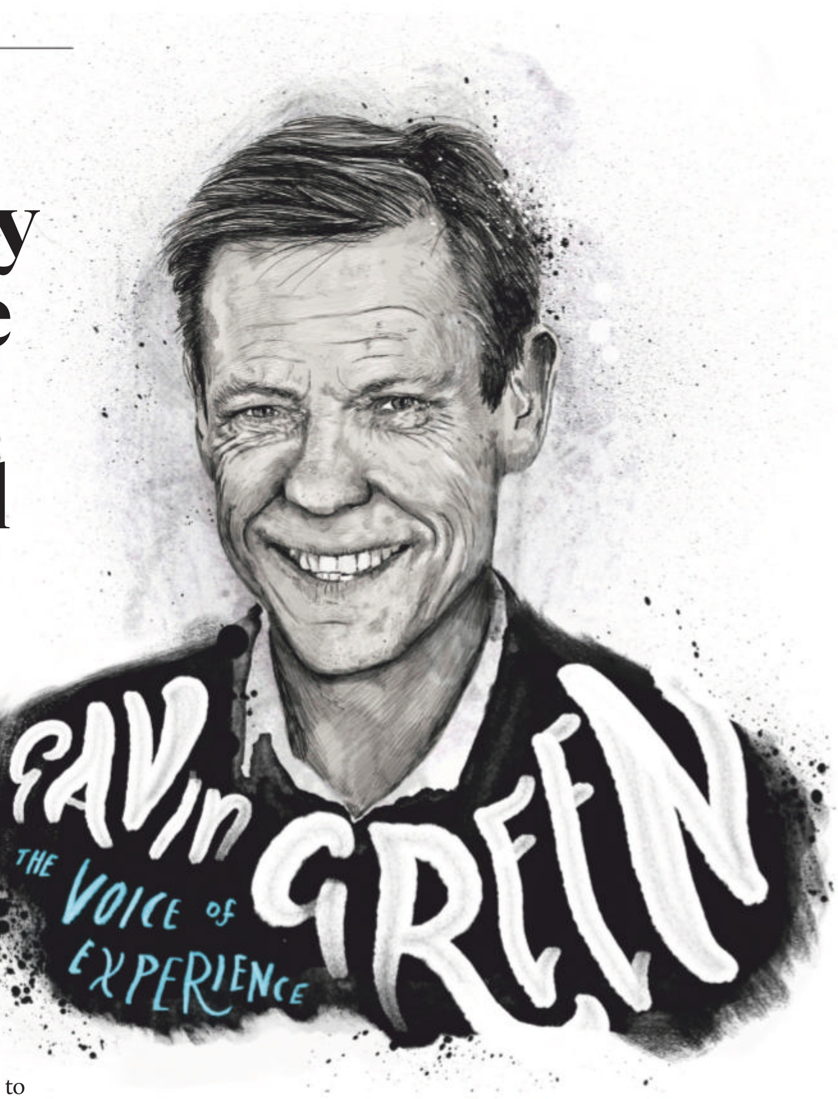
‘Disputes with the car industry were inevitable when GBU listed half of all new cars as boring’



Every editor wants a boss like Ian Fraser. One of the handful of men who ‘made’ *CAR* magazine, and thereby profoundly influenced modern motoring journalism, Ian died recently aged 89; Mel Nichols paid tribute in Agenda last month. I’d like to add a few words about Ian, who was proprietor for much of my time as editor (1987-’92). He was a quiet and gentle man who was fiercely supportive of his editorial team. He knew editorial integrity and quality were the keys to long-term success.

CAR’s strident views meant disputes with the car industry or other advertisers were inevitable. After all, The Good, The Bad & The Ugly buyer’s guide at the back of the magazine listed about half of all the cars sold in the UK as ‘boring’.

Ian would always back his editor. He never interfered with my work but gave sound advice when requested; hands-off but supportive. He had been a successful editor himself, so his counsel was invariably good. Ian’s influence was profound. Not only a highly creative editor, he served as the magazine’s co-owner from 1974 to ’89. He and Andrew Frankl bought *CAR* from the magazine giant Nat Mags: FF Publishing’s smallness was part of its appeal, a publishing minnow outgunning the giants. It was a highly stimulating environment and success fuelled further creativity.

When I appeared on the scene as a regular freelancer in 1981, FF operated from a tiny office in West Smithfield, home of London’s historic meat market. The Ian Fraser I met then – and he didn’t change over the years – was a slightly hunched and balding man who seemed older than his years (he was then just 45). He dressed like an English country gent despite his (soft but palpable) Australian accent.

He invariably wore a tailor-made tweed jacket, twill trousers and Church’s brogues. To reinforce the squirearchical image, he owned a fine manor house in Norfolk, purchased when the money flowed. He retired to it every weekend, where he enjoyed his extensive collection of cars – which ranged from a much-loved Lancia Fulvia 1.6 HF to, when the profits grew, a Mercedes 500 SL, Lancia Stratos and a Ferrari Daytona. He nicknamed the latter Genghis.

By then, the company had moved from West Smithfield to a fine house in Earls Court Road that had formerly been a brothel. That move was in mid-1984, when I joined the *CAR* staff. On one of my first days, Ian marched into our little editorial office and proudly announced: ‘Good news everybody, we’ve just lost Honda!’

We all cheered and got on with our work, invigorated by our no-compromise stance and our owner’s unequivocal support. There were similar spats with Volkswagen, Volvo, Vauxhall and others, over critical stories, or scoop photos, or news pieces that caused upset.

Ian and Andrew sold FF in 1989. They kept the sale a secret, announcing it at a wine bar just off Kensington High Street. Some strangers in suits stood by uncomfortably: they were our new masters from Murdoch Magazines, part of News International. They let us get on with our mission, and *CAR*’s print sales reached new heights under their stewardship. They also had the good sense to keep Ian as MD.

He left in 1991 when Murdoch sold *CAR* to UK publisher Emap, retiring to drive his cars and live the country life.

I last saw Ian in 2012, when I interviewed him at a pub in Norfolk for a story commemorating the magazine’s 50th anniversary. He had Parkinson’s and was clearly unwell. He had trouble walking, although the mind was still sharp, his dress just as dapper, and his wit undiminished.

Many years before he died, after the deaths of two *CAR* legends – LJK Setright and Phil Llewellin – he wrote in a letter: ‘So many good people have died recently that I am wondering whether God is preparing to publish a motoring magazine. He seems to have cornered a lot of the talent.’ The perfect proprietor has just joined that elite band.

Former *CAR* editor Gavin Green, who carried the torch lit by Ian Fraser, is now a globally respected automotive commentator

Peter Strain

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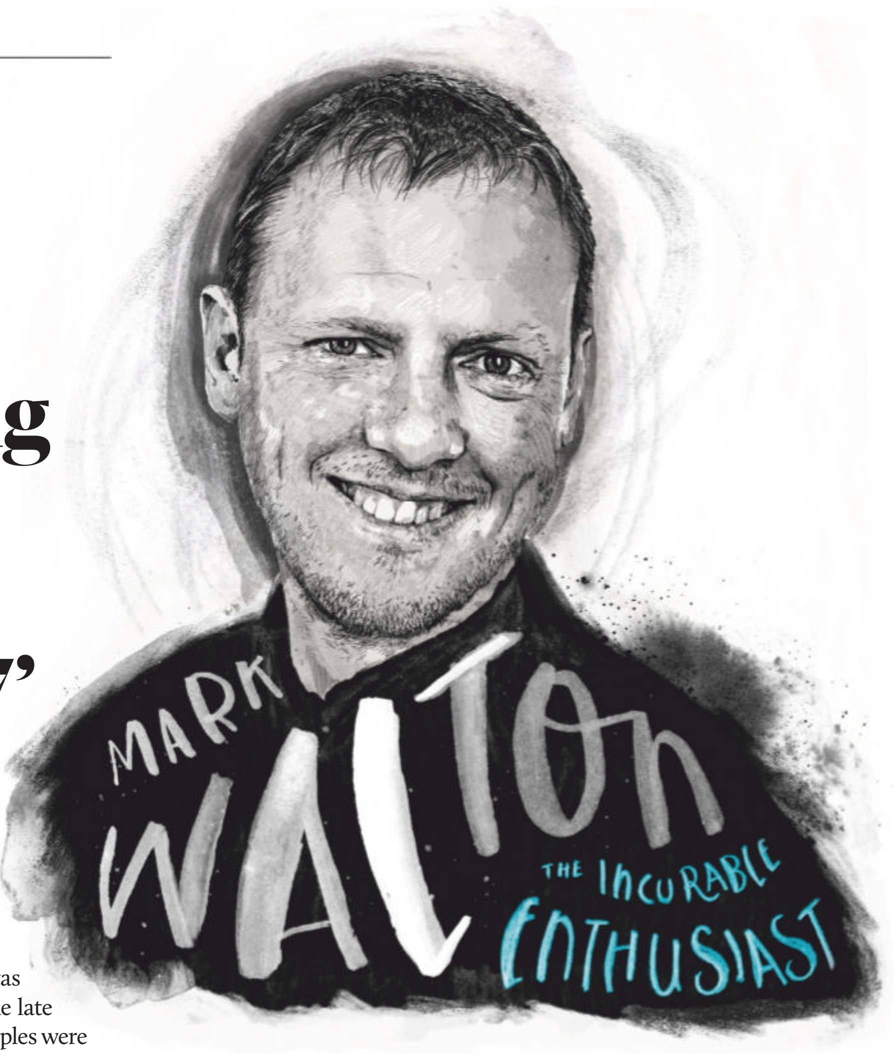
‘Porsche sunroofs caused more cabin buffeting than a total windscreen failure in a 747’



Rumours that Porsche is developing a new Flachbau or slant-nose 911 got my mind racing. The original 911 Flachbau was inspired by the 935 racing car of the late 1970s, and the first roadgoing examples were bodykits from the German tuner Kremer. Then, in 1982, TAG owner Mansour Ojjeh asked Porsche for a ‘real’ roadgoing 935, which became the one-off 935 Street, a kind of 911/935 road-race hybrid, with flared arches and a wild rear wing. Tapping into the zeitgeist, Porsche then started offering official flat-nose conversions for regular 911 Turbos, through its Sonderwunsch (or ‘special request’) department.

Most automotive terms sound great in German (like Kraftfahrzeugsinnenausstattungsneugeruchsgenuss – or ‘new car smell’) but Sonderwunsch sounds like a kind of Bavarian hot dog.

Anyway, those factory flat-nose 911s cost a fortune at the time, with over 500 modifications to the standard Turbo – apparently the invoice used to run to 17 pages. I really wish I’d bought one a few years ago, because by the early 2000s they’d become naff throwbacks to the decade of *Miami Vice* and MTV. Now they’re cool again and prices have soared (inevitably, because I didn’t buy one).

But if Porsche can bring back the Flachbau, maybe we can resurrect other cool things from the 1980s and give them a new lease of life. Like the electric retractable aerial. This – for our younger readers – is the long-forgotten cousin of the pop-up headlight, and it offered kids of my generation the same kind of pleasure. It was the sound I loved – that distinctive, rhythmic electric-motor whirr, as the silver wand came gliding magically out of the front wing like Excalibur out of a lake. Joyous.

Then there’s the 1980s sunroof. Not the modern panoramic roof favoured by the likes of Tesla, with its seamless views and electrochromic glass; I mean a proper, solid submarine hatch that would slide back to create a tiny, tea-tray-sized hole above the driver’s head. No one ever used them because they caused more cabin buffeting than a total windscreen failure in a 747, but no ’80s Porsche was complete without one.

And ‘Turbo’ stickers – please let’s bring them back. In 2025 practically every modern car has a 1.0-litre, three-cylinder turbo engine, so the word is less exotic than it was, but just picture those straked decals: the Renault Clio TURBO, the Kia Picanto TURBO, the Volkswagen Polo TURBO. And now that Porsche has turned the word into just another trim level (as per its fully-electric Taycan Turbo) maybe the new 911 Turbo Flachbau should have double turbo TURBO-TURBO stickers, so there’s no confusion.

Digital dashboards. So cool. I mean the first LED dashboards from that very distinct era of the mid 1980s, when analogue dials were first replaced by stylised electronic displays.

The groundbreaking Aston Martin Lagonda wedge of the 1970s used cathode-ray tubes, believe it or not – effectively, little grainy TV screens that represented the speedo, revcounter and warning lights. But after that came the brightly coloured LED technology, democratised by cars like the Renault 11, Citroën BX and MG Montego. Dashboards started to resemble glowing, low-resolution Atari video games – and who doesn’t want a bit of *Tron* in their car?

The final item on my retro cool list is the most controversial: back in the 1980s, all cars looked better with a bull bar. Everything from the Suzuki SJ to Ford Escort vans were sporting bull bars, and by the early 1990s even ambulances had them. They were eventually banned in 2007, but come on – bull bars still make a car look more purposeful, more angry, more ’80s.

So in summary, yes please Porsche, I’ll order a modern 911 Flachbau – but I’d like to ask your Sonderwunsch team for some additional modifications (17 pages of them). These include a bull bar, an electric aerial, a sunroof, straked Turbo decals down the doors and a brightly coloured LED dashboard straight out of *Knight Rider*. Throw in a CD player and I’ll listen to *Take My Breath Away* as I drive off.

Editor-at-large Mark Walton loves F1, new cars, old cars, driving and writing about it all, sometimes using exceptionally long words

Peter Strain

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ABBEY ROAD
EX90

Volvo EX90 at Abbey Road Studios

True Sound on the move

The story behind the Bowers & Wilkins audio system in the latest generation Volvo cars, and how you can experience the sound of Abbey Road.

It all starts with the legendary Bowers & Wilkins 801, the company's flagship loudspeaker launched 45 years ago, successive generations of which have been used as Abbey Road's monitor of choice ever since.

How does the current iteration of the 801, the 801 D4, inspire what is probably the finest audio system to appear in a car – currently found in the Volvo EX90 and the new ES90?

We spoke to Bowers & Wilkins Director of Product Marketing and Communications Andy Kerr and Automotive Engineering Manager George Fryer to find out. Andy Kerr comments: "Throughout its history, Bowers & Wilkins has insisted on creating, designing and manufacturing countless unique technologies in house. The 801, as the company's flagship product, is where we debut those new ideas and push the boundaries of what's possible in audio performance. "We then trickle down those technologies into versions suitable for use in other products in our portfolio, including audio systems in cars."

Bowers & Wilkins' partnership with Volvo reaches back to 2014. The British loudspeaker brand wanted to develop its reputation as the world's best specialist audio company with a new audience, and to establish new performance standards for sound quality in previously unexplored categories.

Simultaneously, Volvo's desire to drive growth into the premium category, partly through the creation

801 Abbey Road Limited Edition Loudspeakers

of superior cabin environments that offered a better driver and passenger experience than rivals, inspired the brand to explore new partnerships and set new standards for quality and comfort in the marketplace.

Surprisingly, the starting point for a new in-car audio system can be some five years before it will appear in the vehicle in question. Bowers & Wilkins works in collaboration with the audio team from Volvo plus electronics partner HARMAN.

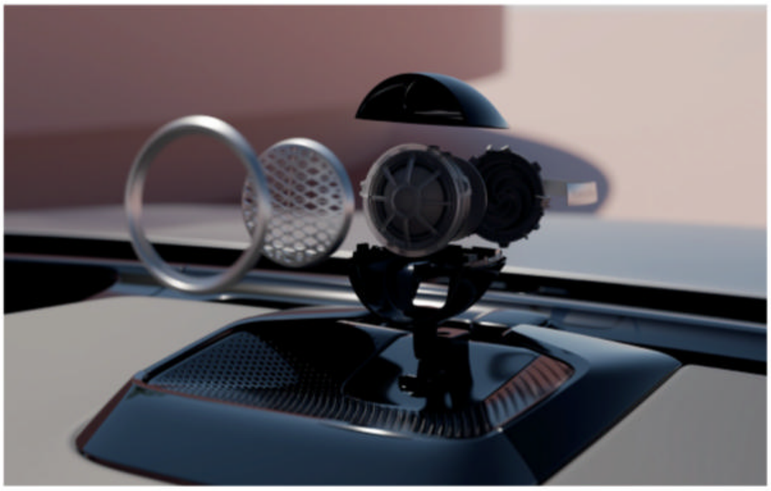
According to George Fryer, "We are collectively aiming to offer the very best, class-leading performance. None of the partners involved are interested in providing something that is merely 'just good enough'. Together, we design and specify both the components to be used and critically, their location and installation within the vehicle. We are lucky that the Volvo team completely understand the importance of positioning speakers in their optimum places."

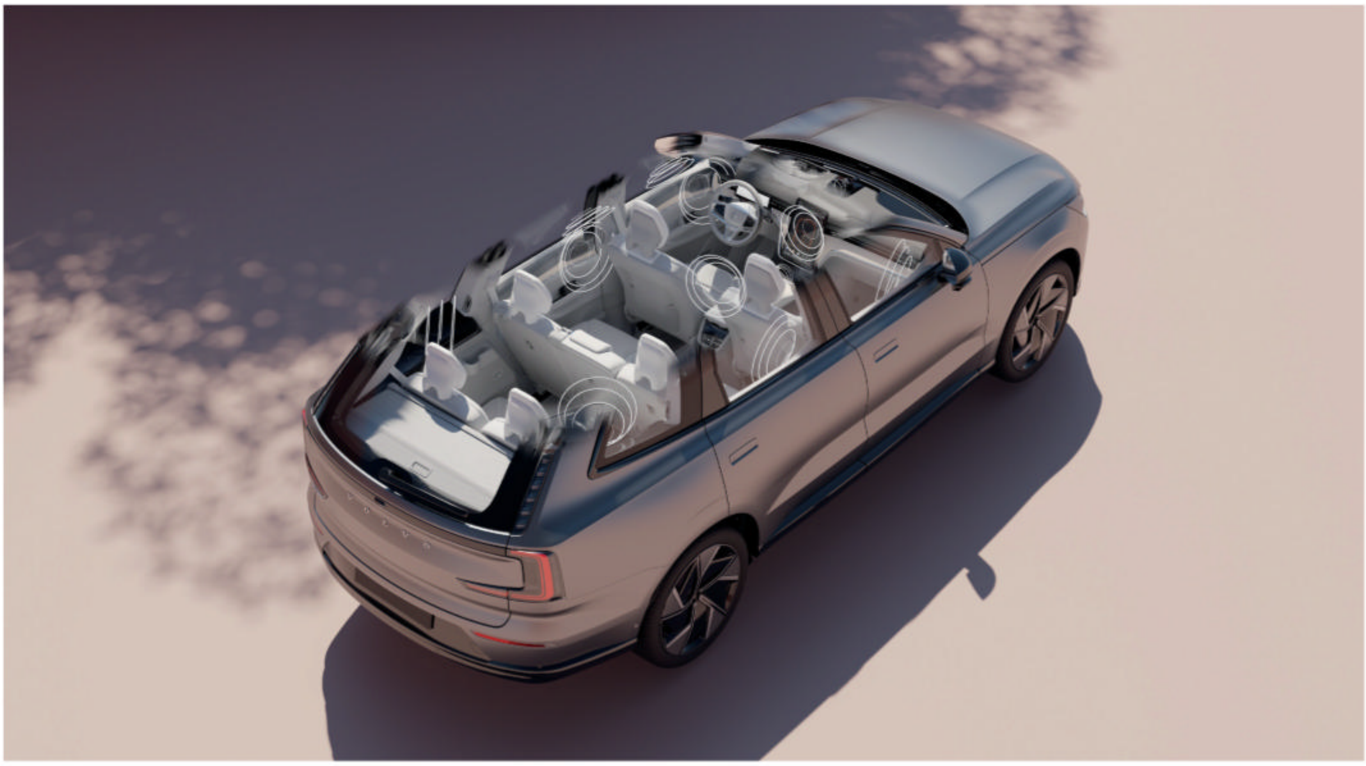
Modelling software and technologies such as DIRAC have helped speed the process of optimising speaker integration in the tuning process, but listening remains the fundamental part of the development process, with testing conducted in two stages.

Stage one is to form a performance base line and is undertaken with prototype products. Indeed, it may even be included at the clay model phase of vehicle development – although much of this has now been replaced by virtual reality.

George Fryer comments: "Our starting point is to optimise the front sound stage. Seamless integration between the multiple speakers is also a priority, particularly with regards to the evenness of bass performance throughout the car. Finally, we work on integration of the main system with the speakers

BELOW: An exploded view of Bowers & Wilkins Tweeter-on-Top technology in the Volvo





Volvo EX90 soundstage visualization

mounted in the headrests and the headlining to ensure a consistently immersive experience throughout the cabin."

A second stage of tuning uses pre-production loudspeakers, and is where the team adds the final 'polish' to the system via a process of listening and fine tuning.

Andy Kerr says, "We now have over 15 years' experience of working with manufacturers such as Volvo, across all our partner brands we have developed some 89 cars. That gives us a very good collective understanding of what we want to achieve and how to deliver it."

Andy Kerr adds, "It might seem surprising to some hi-fi enthusiasts, but the car environment has some advantages over home hi-fi. In a home system, there is an almost infinite number of possibilities in terms of loudspeaker placement, room size, room acoustics and the location of the listener. Conversely, with a car, we know exactly where the speakers and listeners are positioned, which gives us much more control over how to optimise the system."

The Volvo EX90 features a highly advanced Bowers & Wilkins audio system, which includes several of the brand's proprietary technologies. Each of the speakers in the EX90 has been carefully positioned within the car's cabin; seven Continuum cone midrange drivers and five Nautilus Double Dome tweeters are complemented by eight headrest and headlining speakers. DSP and 1600 Watts of power are supplied by HARMAN electronics, and the system is also capable playing Dolby Atmos content.

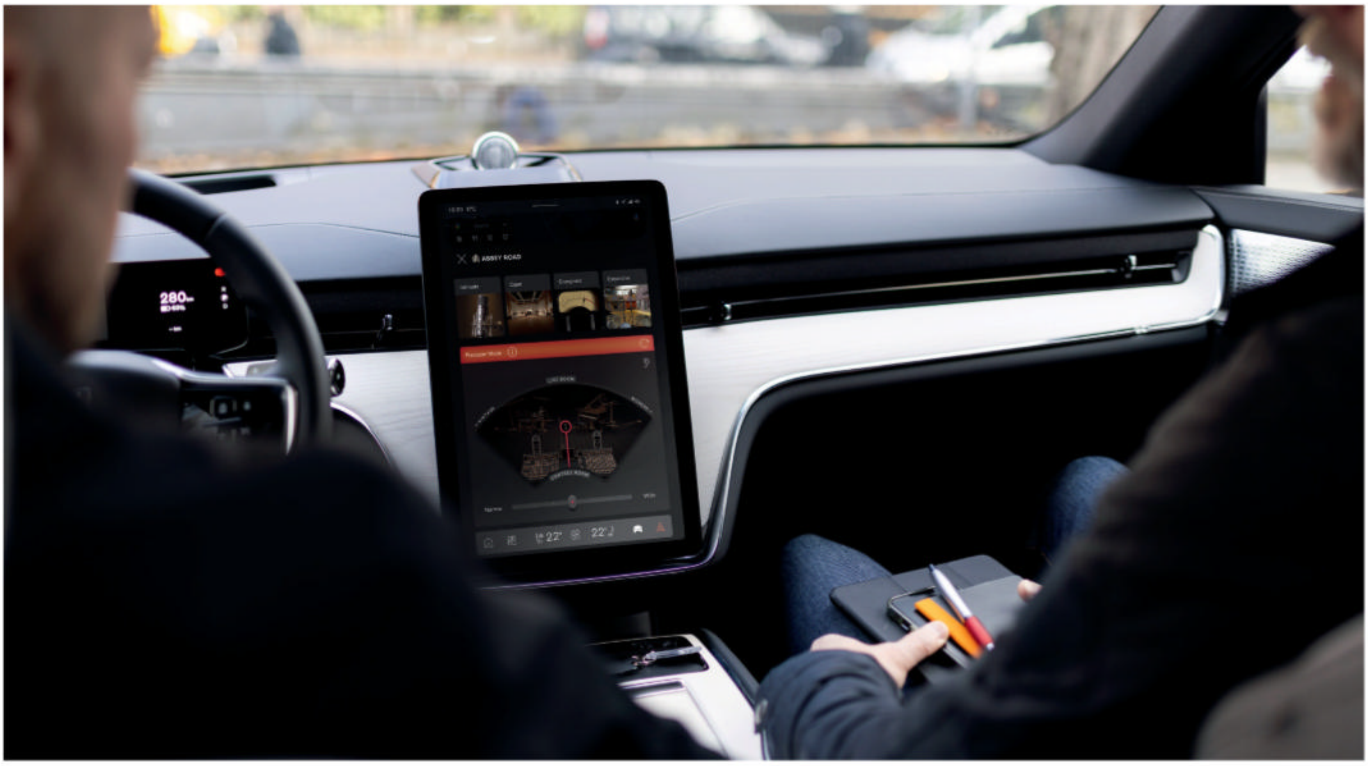
The EX90 also uses Tweeter-on-Top technology mounted on the dashboard. Its design, derived from the tweeter technology used in the Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4, reduces sound reflections from the windscreen and other surrounding surfaces, ensuring that a direct, accurate but wide frontal soundstage is created.

The best tweeters use the stiffest and lightest materials to remain 'pistonic' for as long as possible. The Double Dome design comprises a 35-micron aluminium diaphragm reinforced with a 50-micron ring profile bonded to the rear surface to stiffen the structure in its weakest area, while maintaining light weight to ensure a fast and accurate response.

The tweeters are used in combination with a rear 'Nautilus chamber' to ensure music is delivered with exceptional clarity and detail by preventing internal standing waves from reflecting off the back of the enclosure and returning forwards to excite the driver.

Developed by Bowers & Wilkins over eight years, Continuum is a unique material specifically designed as the ideal mid-range driver with its woven construction allowing both light weight and low distortion.

BELOW: Bowers & Wilkins Continuum cone technology in the Volvo



Abbey Road Studios Mode in the Volvo EX90

Continuum gives a smooth but detailed, natural and precise sound, with excellent off-axis performance for wide sound distribution within the EX90's cabin.

Is designing a sound system for an EV such as EX90 easier? George Fryer: "To a certain extent, yes. We have a lower noise floor to work with; the EX90 has a very quiet cabin, particularly at low speeds, so we can place less emphasis on the system needing to adapt to background noise. The EX90 also has a relatively large cabin which helps in terms of optimal speaker locations and overall sound quality."

Bowers & Wilkins, HARMAN and Volvo have partnered with Abbey Road to the develop Abbey Road Studios Mode. Already available on the EX90 and recently launched in the ES90, this groundbreaking in-car listening experience captures the unique characteristics of Abbey Road's iconic studio spaces, equipment and processes to create a new listening experience.

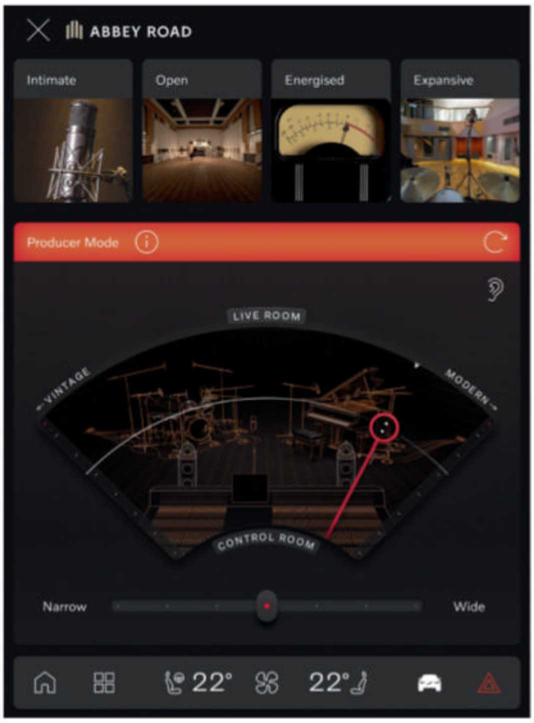
Careful measurement and modelling techniques were used to capture the essence of Abbey Road's studios, as well as the acoustic signature of the recording equipment used by artists and studio engineers for decades. Using the most innovative technologies and leveraging decades of experience working on both sound design and loudspeaker engineering, the team was able to build a highly convincing 3D acoustic environment in the Volvo cabin.

Abbey Road Studios Mode means everyone can experience the unique sound of the studio environment, and gives music lovers the opportunity to explore and create new ways of listening. It also gives listeners the change to easily adjust the sound to their own preferences, via the large central control screen.

It includes four presets to provide different listening experiences that can be used to easily complement certain music genres. Alternatively, a Producer Mode gives the user the freedom to explore both the scale of the spaces at Abbey Road and the way in which equipment affects tonality – shifting the acoustic from a retro vintage to a deeper, modern sound, narrowing or expanding the stereo sound field, and adjusting the acoustic environment, just as a producer or engineer would do.

The outcome is both utterly engaging and incredibly immersive. Just like the original 801 loudspeaker, the combination of the Bowers & Wilkins audio system, the Volvo EX90 and Abbey Road Studios Mode is both the debut of a new idea, and an in-car audio system that pushes the boundaries of what's possible in performance.

RIGHT: Create new ways of listening with Abbey Road Studios Mode



STOP THE WORLD CLOCK

We'd be happy if progress ceased with Porsche's new hybrid-free 911 Carrera S. Same with the Lotus Emira and BMW's manual M3? Let's find out

Words Georg Kacher **Photography** Tom Salt

One of my jobs here is easy: praising three excellent cars, each from a long and magnificent lineage. The Lotus Emira, BMW M3 and Porsche 911 are all great cars to drive and live with… aside from one or two reservations, which we'll get to. It's hard to see any of them being replaced by something that will do the same job better.

Tick. Mission accomplished. Move on.

The second job is not so simple. In putting the latest 911 alongside two of its less direct rivals – cars that you might look to for similar thrills to the 911, but delivered in a different way – we're hoping to shed some light on the nagging suspicion that the ever-evolving, ever-growing 911 has moved too far from its roots.

The Emira is lighter, simpler and less expensive, and asks the question: is the 911 too heavy and complex? From the opposite direction, the M3 seems to offer comparable performance, but with the bonus of proper back seats and a boot. Is it in fact the complete car, in a way the 911 can never be?

Think of this as a celebration and an examination of the state of the sports-car art, not as a traditional comparison test – there are too many ifs and buts for this to be a Giant Test with a first-second-third ranking. These three cars are simply too different in concept and character to be processed through the same filter.

Pricing is an issue, too. The as-tested 911 costs a shocking £156,816 with all options, almost matching the sticker of a base GT3. The 359bhp Lotus Emira carries a £79,500 tag. A UK-spec M3 will set you back at least £89,635, but our Yas Marina Blue specimen is fully loaded with wall-to-wall carbonfibre trim and the M Race Track pack, pushing the grand total to a lofty £123,120.

The six-speed manual M3 is only available in left-hand-drive form and exclusively with the relatively modest 473bhp S50B30 engine (its peak torque of 406lb ft is all the ZF 'box can munch without losing a tooth or two). If you're happy without a manual, there's no shortage of M3 and M4 variants. And if the practicality angle is important to you, there's the Touring to consider as well. The Emira line-up is small by comparison, whereas the 911's is vast. For an extra £6500 you could, for instance, turn the 911 Carrera S into an all-wheel-drive 4S, and there are cabriolet and targa metamorphoses too.

Let's start with the M3, which aims to do a lot of the same good stuff as the 911, plus some practical things the Porsche isn't interested in delivering. In my experience the M3 shines brightest when it has a manual transmission – so, lucky me – but that's no longer a choice offered to buyers in the UK. The last of its kind was the F80 phased out in 2019, so the only option for like-minded enthusiasts wanting a right-hand-drive M3 would be a used model.

New, the only UK M3 saloon is the 523bhp Competition M xDrive fitted with the eight-speed Steptronic. Even though BMW acknowledges that the long-running manual gearbox is still a major asset for many aficionados, the next M3 due in 2028 will be automatic only, even as a left-hooker, because ZF no longer sees a business case for its low-volume six-speed manual. Which is a shame – after all, there is no more emotional man-machine interface than a perfectly spaced and neatly executed manual transmission, like the slick and swift unit installed in our test car.

It soon becomes clear that our memory has not played us false: this M3 provides a very special driving experience. The excitement of working clutch and gearbox in harmony, a task which calls for a more elaborate set of skills than paddleshifting or locking the selector lever in Drive, is rewarded with every mile. If your priority is an engaging driving experience, nobody cares about the three-tenths the manual version loses to the rear-drive M3 Competition (also no longer a UK car), or the seven-tenths it falls behind the xDrive model, which spools through the ratios self-actingly with a fake throttle blip as the vapid acoustic cherry on the cake.

Our M3 is special in other ways too. It boasts a set of carbon-ceramic brakes which manage to reel in even the Carrera S driven in anger, time after time, although the BMW has relatively narrow 275/35 ZR19 tyres up front. Not all the deviations from standard are quite so welcome: we find it hard to appreciate the supportive yet desperately uncomfortable thinly padded composite bucket seats, which have no mercy at all on a stressed back.

To drive, though, the M3 is a delight, and of the three cars here it's the happiest to slide if circumstances permit. It instantly connects in dynamic terms. Although our M3 and the new Carrera S deliver an identical 473bhp, the BMW narrowly wins on torque by 406lb ft ▶

Georg flaunting his German-spec manual M3

Overkill, but optional carbon ceramics are great

Not obvious rivals – until you add a 911 to the mix

NUMBERS WON'T BE THE DECIDER HERE, AND IN ANY CASE ARE TOO CLOSE TO TIP THE SCALES

S GO 4009
M UC 3432

911 may have grown, but M3 is biggest car here

911 remains phenomenal: sure-footed, quick and comfortable

against 391lb ft, which contributes to its more substantial character.

Not everyone will love the M3's exterior looks, nor its gaudy instrument graphics, endless set-up combinations, ho-hum voice control instead of unambiguous switches and knobs. At least the classic iDrive controller is still there, and the widescreen in-dash monitor eclipses the rivals in size and content, and setting up the fire-red toggles on the steering wheel to activate your preferred combination of M settings is the work of moments.

This trio of cars is not primarily about outright performance. It's more about the feeling of speed, the staggered depths of involvement, the nuances of excitement, the varying challenges of getting every dynamic sequence absolutely right, corner after corner. Numbers are not the decider here, and in any case they are too close together to tip the scale one direction or the other. At 4.4sec from 0-62mph, the Lotus falls nine tenths behind the 911 in the stopwatch derby, but it trails the BMW by only 0.2sec.

Our Lotus seems highly sensitive to the pressures in its Goodyear Eagle F1 Supersports. We have to stop twice to make adjustments, but neither the recommended readings nor subsequent minor changes produce enough front-end grip through ultra-fast sweepers. Quite the contrary: at an indicated pedal-to-the-metal 177mph, the Emira displays an uncomfortable mix of wayward tramlining, on-off vague steering feel and intermittent axle lift. On the same autobahn and at a near identical pace, neither of the other two cars triggers similar white-knuckle moments.

Although the Emira is too big and heavy to qualify as a reimagined Elise, we are smitten by it in more ways than one. At 1446kg this base Turbo version weighs even more than the discontinued Evora, undercutting the 911 Carrera S by only 100kg. While the M3 is 1730kg, the BMW fields four doors, seats five and has a big boot to match. The Lotus is the most intense car of the lot, and we love it to bits for its playful chuckability, nimble handling, riveting grip, effortless acceleration, catchy soundtrack and anything-goes mentality. On the narrow and tight mountain roads north of Lake Constance, the mid-engined two-seater is the most rewarding drive by a small yet distinct margin.

Our Lotus is spine-friendlier than the M3 fitted with the Race Track pack, although it can't come close to the comfort provided by the optional adaptive 18-way sports seats installed in the Porsche.

DESPITE ITS IMPOSSIBLE WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION THE 911 IS EVEN MORE FIRMLY PLANTED THAN THE M3

Not simple like an Elise, but nicely uncluttered

Emira is intense and highly rewarding

Although you sit down low and need to giraffe in and out of the Emira like a cartoon contortionist, the Emira is actually sufficiently roomy even for those who didn't shout stop in time when God dished out the growth hormones.

If you're looking for a no-frills driving machine kitted out to deliver, not to pamper, the Lotus is bound to please. Its cockpit is the purest and least fancy. There are no trick driving aids worth mentioning, and you will look in vain for a head-up display, but the touch pads on the steering wheel are intuitive fingertip controls, old-fashioned knobs govern temperature and volume, and the easy-to-read multi-mode instrument panel is flanked by a smallish centre touchscreen that can be operated by regular humans, not just seasoned gamers.

ESC may be deactivated by a simple stab at the monitor, while the three driving modes labelled Tour, Sport and Track are only a rocker switch away, and the gear selector next to the caged starter button is clickety-click swift but needs an irritating double impulse to change from forward to reverse and vice versa.

On paper, the 2.0-litre four-cylinder engine makes the Lotus a non-starter against the two German cars with their 3.0-litre sixes. Well, the light and compact Lotus-AMG engine is, even in its 359bhp non-SE guise, a more suitable fit than the supercharged 3456cc V6 courtesy of Toyota found in the range-topping Emira, and the German eight-speed DCT promises a quicker fix than the Japanese six-speed slushmatic. True, the running characteristics of the AMG motor are on the rough side, and its monosyllabic baritone pitch morphs from a rowdy growl into an unfiltered raucous roar. Redlined at 7200rpm, the turbocharged 16-valver unfolds its 317lb ft torque blanket from 3000 to 5500rpm.

Most of the time it's excellent, but the test car displays another dynamic downside in addition to the aforementioned intermittently loose front end. On a very hot day up in the mountains, the brake performance leaves a lot to be desired. The steel discs fielded by the four-piston AP Racing system call for a steady increase in pedal pressure to stay on top of comparatively little mass and weight. And on the autobahn the stopping apparatus slips into emergency mode after two consecutive high-speed deceleration manoeuvres. An exclamation mark and a warning text in the main instrument panel suggest that this might indeed be serious, so we back off to cool the brakes. Sure, it's not often that you can drive this hard and fast, in temperatures this high. And bear in mind that ours is a car from a dealer, not from Lotus. But also bear in mind that the other cars don't suffer the same problems on the day.

Our 911 is the 473bhp Carrera S, which arrived recently to plug the gap between the 389bhp £103,700 Carrera and the 534bhp £137,900 GTS. Priced from £120,500, the Carrera S is the latest version of a model that in the past has often outsold all other 911s. ▶

In the tightly packed 911 corral, the alternative that S buyers should seriously consider is the £115,400 T, which features a six-speed manual transmission (the previous fiddly super-long seven-speeder has been binned) plus PASM sports suspension and a limited-slip differential, wider 20-inch front and 21-inch rear wheels, and a more vocal exhaust. The T may be the better fit on clear minor roads, but the updated S is a more polished, easier-to-live-with all-rounder which rides better and steps on it a little harder.

The only available transmission here is the familiar eight-speed PDK 'box, which feels a bit dozy in a Comfort mode clearly calibrated for clean running. So for plucking the stars from the sky, you want to be in Sport or Sport Plus. Squatting down fiercely when unleashed with vigour, the Porsche processes first and second gear more energetically, and it has the highest top speed. It lays down its power in an almost effortless style. Not unlike a small-block V8, the compact boxer spreads its punchy 391lb ft torque plateau from an instantly accessible 2300rpm to a buzzing 5000rpm, which still leaves you with 2400 more rpm to play with before the Game Over chip intervenes.

The extra grunt gained over last year's model is down to feistier turbochargers and a pair of higher throughput intercoolers borrowed from the 992.1 Turbo. And, remarkably, despite its impossible weight distribution the rear-engined Porsche is even more firmly planted and directionally stable than the M3. The Porsche carves through any radius even more sure-footedly, but the 992 feels two fingers too wide on these super-tight country lanes, which have not evolved much since Wilhelm II was king. Although it now combines the firmer GTS damper setting with the stiffer springs of the pre-facelift model, the new Carrera S floats a little too much and understeers a tad early when pushed.

The Porsche dashboard has over time evolved from button-studded analogue to zoom-and-swipe digital. It offers a wide choice of visual configurations, from the classic five-tube layout to a full-frame map, but it is also busier and thus more distracting than the Emira. The centre monitor could be a bit bigger, a head-up display is again conspicuous by its absence, and like the BMW the 911 makes you scroll through a confusing overload of icons.

Consumption? The factory figures are quite close together, ranging from 30.6mpg for the Emira over 28.2mpg for the M3 to 27.4mpg for the 911. But as soon as you indulge in more extreme driving, like flat-out autobahn stints in the early hours, ten-tenths corkscrew hillclimbs so curvy you never even need fourth gear, and a few 0-62-0mph demo runs for the entertainment of onlooking influencers, the only contestant to stay on the eco-friendly side of 10mpg is the Lotus.

It's a reminder that these cars are, to different degrees, primarily for fun. The Lotus is a sharp back-road weapon with telepathic steering and a handling balance tuned in heaven and all wrapped up in a snug eye-catching package. It makes a wonderful weekend plaything, more special than a Porsche Cayman S, although six grand dearer than the more complete Cayman GTS.

If you can find an M3 or M4 in the spec that's right for you – depending on how you feel about manual transmission, and about painfully uncomfortable seats – the BMW can also be a huge amount of fun, with a phenomenal engine, while also doing the passengers-and-bags job that the others barely attempt.

The Porsche at times feels like a visitor from a higher division, with a performance margin over the others. But then again, on twisty minor roads – traditionally a very happy place for 911s – it can feel a little too wide, and the ride isn't perfect when pushed hard. You can always look elsewhere in the extensive 911 line-up – and the smaller, less expensive 718 too – for something closer to your dream car. The price of any 2025 911 will rule it out for many, so it's good to be reminded that rivals offering similar thrills are available for less.

LOTUS EMIRA TURBO

PRICE £79,500 (£83,955 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 1991cc 16v turbocharged four-cylinder, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 359bhp @ 6600rpm, 317lb ft @ 3000rpm, 4.4sec 0-62mph, 171mph
WEIGHT 1446kg
EFFICIENCY 30.6mpg (official), 10.9mpg (tested), 407-mile range (official), 199 miles (tested), 208g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

Hurry! They won't be around for long in this form

PORSCHE 911 CARRERA S

PRICE £120,500 (£156,816 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 2981cc 24v twin-turbocharged flat-six, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 473bhp @ 6500rpm, 391lb ft @ 2300rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph, 191mph
WEIGHT 1515kg
EFFICIENCY 27.4mpg (official), 9.6mpg (tested), 509-mile range (official), 178 miles (tested), 238g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

BMW M3

PRICE From £89,635 (£123,120 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 2993cc 24v twin-turbocharged straight-six, six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 473bhp @ 6250rpm, 406lb ft @ 2650rpm, 4.2sec 0-62mph, 181mph
WEIGHT 1730kg
EFFICIENCY 28.2mpg (official), 9.4mpg (tested), 369-mile range (official), 196 miles (tested), 246g/km CO2
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10 CARS, 3 DAYS... AND IT GOES DOWN TO THE WIRE!
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GTI is back
EPIC V12s!
ALL-NEW FERRARI 12CILINDRI, BRUTAL ASTON VANQUISH AND 1001BHP LAMBO REVUELTO FACE OFF
car
Fantastique 4
CAYENNE DRIVEN!
ALL-NEW, ALL-ELECTRIC. FLAT OUT IN THE MOST POWERFUL PORSCHE YET

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First drives: The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

AUDI S6 E-TRON

Rings of fire and ice

Hot but not too hot, posh but not too posh, Audi's electric S6 shows what it can do in the German winter

OPEN-AIR THEATRE

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THE LAWNMOWER MAN

The enigmatic designer responsible for today's elegant Mazdas favours heavy machinery, natural materials and human creativity over AI and digital shortcuts

Words Guy Bird **Photography** Toby Thyer

NASA-level computing power and cutting-edge digital design tools will only get you so far. If you want to really create something special in car design you need to roll up your sleeves and plunge your hands into clay. Lots of clay.

This is at the heart of Masashi Nakayama's thinking. The general manager of Mazda's design division tells me: 'We produce many more clay models than other car makers, and Mazda consumes the largest amount of clay in the world. We only have a limited number of new-model launches per year. Compared to Toyota we introduce far fewer cars. But we consume more clay than Toyota and the clay itself is customised for our use. It's unique to Mazda.'

This isn't some hipster quirk – Nakayama's tactile approach is his route to some exceptionally elegant mass-market cars. It's no coincidence that design bosses from other car makers keep trying to poach his clay modellers – they're some of the best in the business.

As a case in point, the highly acclaimed Iconic SP concept car started with five quarter-scale clay models followed by three full-scale models that then evolved for a considerable time. Nakayama is clearly enthused by the packaging opportunities the Iconic SP's powertrain might offer too, citing its range-extender rotary engine's smaller size and lighter weight as factors crucial to enabling a lower bonnet and overall silhouette.

Seen up closely, it's remarkable how smooth the low, lithe concept's exterior shape is. There are no angular cuts or jarring creases to its bodywork and the considered details that sensitively accentuate its flow are a lesson in design restraint and good taste, from ultra-slim pop-up lights to a central bonnet spine that helps define the car's symmetry as well as lighting up to denote charging. The fact that the Iconic SP is the very last vehicle exhibit within Mazda's current museum trail – before exiting via the gift shop – backs up the feeling that this is being taken very seriously and will influence a generation of production Mazdas.

For such an influential figure, Nakayama is largely unknown. That's the way he likes it.

He's held the top design job at Mazda since 2021 – taking over from the acclaimed Ikuo Maeda – having joined Mazda back in 1989 when the first MX-5 launched, a car that's arced continuously across his career. He's been involved in a significant tranche of Mazda's steady 21st century renaissance too.

Nakayama's design credits include the interiors of the 2003 Mazda 3 Mk1 and RX-8, plus the 2007 Ryuga and 2011 Minagi concept cars, the latter directly leading to the shapely and commercially successful 2012 CX-5 production car. In the 2010s he was both chief designer and also, unusually, programme manager for the current fourth-generation MX-5. That's a role more typically reserved for engineers, not designers, and the first time this had happened at Mazda. It meant Nakayama had more influence over the vehicle's development and held higher-level conversations with engineers to ensure the original design intent was preserved.

Clay models bring sketches into the physical world

The cutting edge, 1978 style

SAVANNA RX-7

'We consume more clay than Toyota, and the clay itself is customised for our use'

Not that he brags about it, or shows any signs of having let it bloat his ego. 'The biggest reason I got appointed was that I had the strongest enthusiasm for the MX-5,' he suggests. 'Of course it needs engineering capability [too], but the [main] qualification to be MX-5 programme manager is to show love to the MX-5.' He firmly backs his own designs too, owning a current MX-5 and CX-5, plus an original MX-5 for good measure.

In 2019 he landed the deputy general manager design role – Mazda doesn't do fancy creative titles – and then became design general manager two years later. Today, chatting in a quiet area of the museum, he's approachable, calm and smartly attired. But he does gently signal his creative separation from the corporate machine via a brightly coloured shirt with no tie, neat jeans and pair of understated slim-soled trainers.

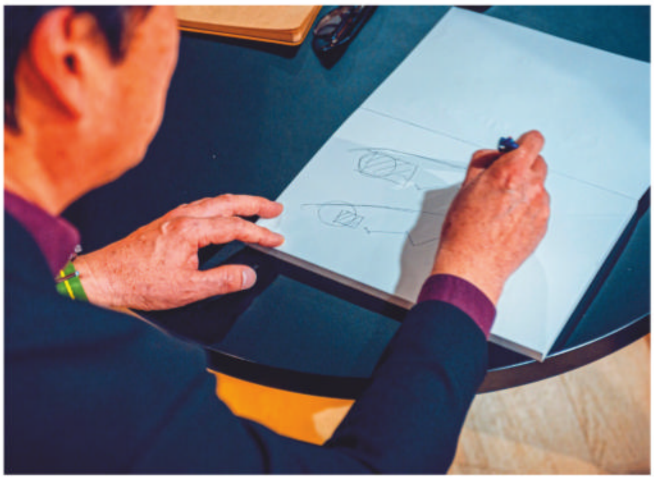
He ducks directly answering questions about which elements of the Iconic SP are destined for the showroom, but he does concede that lots of the exciting elements that make the Iconic SP shine are technically and legislatively feasible, although the decision on whether it will be financially viable to productionise the Iconic SP falls with his tie-wearing colleagues.

Nakayama's upbringing was in the hands-on artisan tradition he still embraces to such good effect. His maternal uncle was a professional piano teacher, while his grandfather was a shrine carpenter, able to fashion elaborate wooden structures without making use of any nails.

Nakayama always loved sketching cars and reading car magazines, and understood from an early age that cars were actually designed, rather than just the result of engineers' decisions. The Lamborghini Miura is a favourite vehicle, followed by another Marcello Gandini classic, the Countach. He also cites 'high-performance fighter jets, ▶

Iconic SP is set to morph into a bigger EV

1989's first MX-5 the result of passion, not market research



‘Our mentality is to take care of things, and that takes a long time’

the graceful movements of elite athletes and the sight of F1 cars from around 1979.’

Less obvious inspiration came from his unusual access to intriguing technical devices at an early age, via his widely travelled great uncle, who was high up in the Japanese Navy. ‘The captain of a battleship during the First World War, he purchased state-of-the-art equipment from around the world, like cameras and recording devices not available in Japan at the time,’ Nakayama explains, ‘then gifted them to my grandfather.’

As a child born in the 1960s, growing up in Hiroshima at a time when the evidence of the US atomic bomb dropped on it at the end of the war was still all around, there's a strong sense of place to his approach to work and life too.

‘There are few places that have experienced losing everything – both material possessions and hope – then rising from zero to create everything anew as a community,’ he says. ‘Hiroshima embodies this resilient spirit, which is strongly reflected in the nature and actions of its people. Additionally, Hiroshima was once a major production centre for weapons. The atomic bomb was dropped there, and as a result, the people developed a unique mindset that blends the dynamic philosophy of pursuing high efficiency in weaponry with the static philosophy of exercising caution and care for those who use them.

‘As someone who grew up in Hiroshima, I feel I possess this mindset as well. For example, while sports cars are fast vehicles, I don't believe that speed alone is everything.’

He's not kidding. When Nakayama does want a distraction from work, he reveals his ‘biggest pleasure is mowing the lawn with a manual mower.’ His lawn is a sizeable 120 square metres and involves some serious commitment. ‘I aim for the quality of the grass on a baseball field and have an automatic sprinkler system that waters the grass daily and adjusts the fertiliser,’ he says, a matter of long years of experience and intuition. ‘It's an art form that involves working with nature. I would really love to plant cherry trees as well.’

Growing up in and around a Buddhist temple was also formative for the future designer. ‘My family owns a temple and my brother is a Buddhist priest,’ he continues. ‘The old priest when we were young would preach to my mum, with me sitting on her lap, so I was exposed to all of this as a baby.

‘I don't intend to infuse any of that atmosphere or elements into modern Mazda interiors, but we do emphasise a horizontal feeling. Human beings are sensitive to verticality and horizontality because we live in gravity. We can tell when something vertical is tipped by one degree, when it's no longer vertical.’

Among the finest current Mazda interiors is in the CX-60, which has unusually prominent and exposed X-shaped stitching (optionally) arranged horizontally across the dashboard. Can Mazda customers expect more of this kind of sensibility around colours and materials on other cars in the range? As is his wont, Nakayama answers a slightly different question, but in a way that sheds some light on his design process and thinking. ‘Symbolically, that detail is proof we put emphasis and effort into our interiors. It's a Japanese tradition,’ he says. ‘Our mentality is to take care of things and that takes a long time.’

Which is nice, but is it enough? In an age where so many start-ups – especially Chinese ones able to create competent all-new cars in well under the traditional six years – are coming to market much more quickly, is there pressure from management to be swifter? ‘Yes, it's true,’ is Nakayama's short and frank answer. But he's very ▸

NEVER STOP CHALLENGING!
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Letters to MAZDA
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Letters to MAZDA

Inquiring minds and skilled hands

Mid-mounted 600cc triple meets gullwing doors

'I really want Mazda to have a unique user experience. I don't want to ask outside companies to create it'

attached to doing things slowly: 'I think our process actually has stronger value, because of the time taken.'

Don't mistake this for being stuck in the past. There's very little that's retro about his work, and as well as interior and exterior design, he acknowledges the importance of making the user experience attractive.

He is not happy that Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are so often the default choice. 'I really want Mazda to have a unique user experience,' he says with some passion; 'I don't want to ask outside companies to create it.'

Nakayama appears to be under pain of death not to divulge any more intel about the Iconic SP's future, but the chances of its ultra-slim pop-up lights and special skyward-opening doors making production seem good. Mazda's chief technology officer, Ryuichi Umeshita, reveals a bit more. He says the MX-5 will stay as a petrol-engined two-seater, while any production version of the Iconic SP would morph into a bigger EV with a rotary-engine range-extender to provide back-up energy to the battery, letting the electric motor power the wheels. He also mentions a possible second powertrain option of a rotary engine as the main driver of the car.

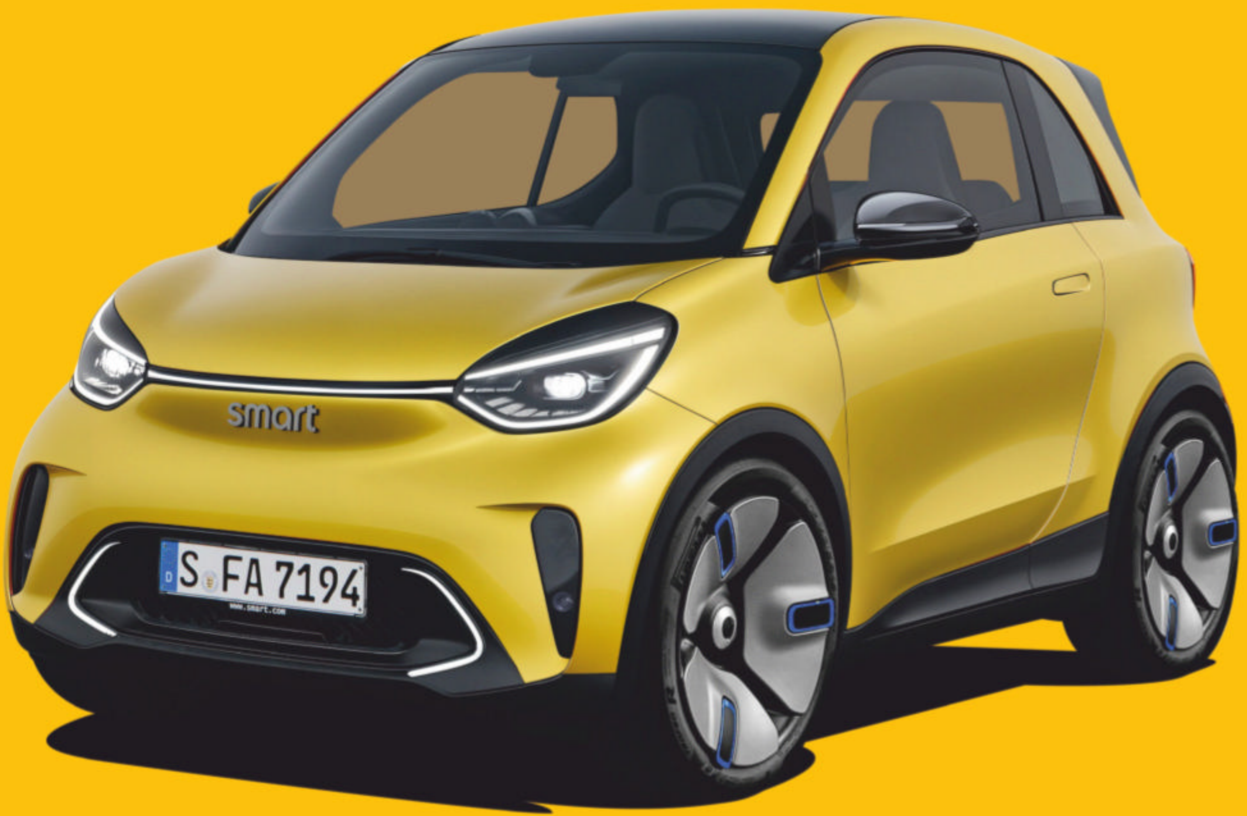
He won't be drawn on the name, but does say: 'You can expect the Iconic SP will be a good successor for the RX-7.' So RX-9? And if so, when? With the current MX-5 already over a decade old, the RX-8 discontinued back in 2012 and the biennial Tokyo Mobility Show due this autumn, late 2025 would be a perfect moment to showcase what Mazda is all about once again. Either way, here's hoping that whatever does get shown will still have a smooth-surfaced body, lights that pop up and doors that fly skyward with a magic Mazda is perfectly placed to deliver. car

The contented look of a man with a perfect lawn

NEW CARS

2026

We count down the 26 hottest cars of next year, including Ferraris, Porsches and the return of old faves



SMART #2

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999

Smart goes back to its roots with a proper two-seat city car

Words Jake Groves **Illustration** Avarvarii

Hurrah! After a few years of doing very un-Smart things – mainly by launching a glut of SUVs – Smart has officially confirmed the return of a chic, two-seat city car to its line-up.

We'll have to put up with another hashtag name, however, as Smart is choosing the #2 designation over resurrecting the ForTwo name. If that seems odd, given that the #1 is bigger than the #2, there is a reason: Smart's European boss Dirk Adelmann tells us the brand will keep naming its SUVs with odd numbers – currently #1, #3 and #5 – and had 'reserved the even ones in between for something non-SUV.'

Adelmann adds that the new #2 'will shape a new era of individual urban automobility, especially in classic smart cities like Rome, London or Paris.

'The decision comes at the right time, as we benefit from the respective strengths of Mercedes-Benz and Geely and strong backing by new investors – along with the successful market launch of the Smart #5.'

In keeping with Smart's modern way of working, the new #2 city car's look will be shaped by the Mercedes-Benz design team but will use technology and engineering from Geely. It'll be manufactured in China, where the model will also be sold, but Smart's priority is Europe. The trouble is, Geely doesn't have a platform small enough to directly carry over to the #2, likely meaning a modification of an existing one is required.

Even so, expect what Smart calls 'new technology for the segment' – likely to translate as driver-assistance technology and some of the cutting-edge infotainment software that launched in the #5.

We'd also be prepared to put money on the likelihood that the info screen will include some sort of animal mascot; the #1 has a fox, the #3 a cheetah and the #5 has a lion. Answers on a postcard as to what the #2's animal of choice will be…

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Smart's all-new two-door, two-seat city EV | **Tech?** Modified Geely platform, cutesy Mercedes-led design, some sort of digital animal mascot for the lols | **Aimed at?** Well-to-do urbanites without kids (or many friends) | **When can I have one?** Towards the end of 2026, likely for around £20k

25

■ FERRARI 296 SPECIALE ■

ONE WORD: SPECIALE

The last Speciale, the 458, might be the best car Maranello's ever built. The new one may change that

Words Ben Miller

THAT ESCALATED FAST

A decade ago, the mesmeric 458 Speciale made a little under 600bhp. The turbocharged 488 Pista bumped that to north of 700bhp in a single generation. And now the turbo hybrid 296 Speciale is good for 868bhp. Stop the world; it's all a bit much.

SIMILAR PLAYBOOK

While the engine may be radically different to that of its V8 forebears (the V6 is related to the engines in both the new F80 hypercar and Ferrari's Le Mans winner), the rationale is much the same – lose some weight (60kg), bump up the power and dial in more aero.

GT3-SPEC CHASSIS

Quicker lap times will come from Multimatic dampers, revised geometry, a 5mm drop in ride height and Cup 2 tyres. Downforce is up 20 per cent at 155mph… Pointless on the road, sure, but you'll feel it howling though Mugello's spicy Arrabbiata curves.

GO FUND ME (PLEASE)

The Speciale coupe's priced at just over €407k/£345k. If that's well within reach there's always the Aperta (open-top special Ferraris tend be rarer, more expensive and even more nailed-on as investments than the coupes) and limited-run Piloti versions.

NEED TO KNOW

| **What is it?** The greatest Ferrari yet (probably) | **Tech?** Every driver-assist system in Ferrari's formidable arsenal | **Aimed at?** Ferrari will tell you it's for keen drivers with a trackday addiction. But also investors. Definitely investors | **When can I have one?** Spring 2026

24

JAGUAR GT

CAT IN HELL?

All change!

We've always been sold on the Type 00's aesthetic merit. It arrived in a tsunami of cultural wailing as Jaguar unveiled its ruthlessly forward-looking new branding, but the car – the ultimate expression of McGovernist design – rode the storm with its laser-cut cleanliness and meltwater purity. But can Jaguar do the impossible and retain that car's uncorrupted art while doubling the number of doors and seats?

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** A four-door electric GT, and the first car of Jaguar's new era | **Tech?** 1000bhp and a 430-mile range | **Aimed at?** 'Young urban creatives' is the official answer | **When can I have one?** Soon

23

KIA EV2

KIA DOES CHIC

Cute little Korean

EV3 too flat-surfaced and boxy for you? The smaller, cuter EV2 should be right up your street, then, when it arrives in early 2026. It's shaping up to be the best looking of Karim Habib's EV series, with curvier forms and a more European vibe. And you just know, thanks to the ongoing might of the E-GMP platform, that it'll be a good EV; decent to drive, quick to charge, efficient and with a decent range for the money.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Another electric urban crossover | **Tech?** Sorted E-GMP platform. Concept's rear-hinged back doors won't be retained. Boo! | **Aimed at?** Everyone, really | **When can I have one?** Summer 2026

22

URBAN EV

CREWE 2.0

Bentley, but different

Who knew Bentley was so bored of its current look? Robin Page and Frank-Steffen Walliser, it seems. The two men (Page as director of design and Walliser as CEO and chairman) have arrived to shake up the conservatism that's pervaded since Stefan Sielaff was on the drawing board (and he left in 2021…). The car you see here is a concept, but Bentley's first EV will draw inspiration from it.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** A concept previewing elements of next year's Urban EV | **Tech?** Group PPE platform; Crewe software | **Aimed at?** Wealthy urbanites | **When can I have one?** We'll see it late 2026

21

IONIQ 6 N

N-CREDIBLE

Drifty EV, anyone?

The 5 N was so good, it was tricky to see how the 6 N would be anything beyond the same ingredients packaged a bit differently. But in fact it's more hardcore, with tweaked power distribution and an aero kit worthy of a GT3 car. It keeps the fake revving sounds and paddleshift 'gears', and the drift mode operates like a dimmer switch, adjusting the degree of oversteer and even the amount of smoke from the tyres.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** N division's second EV | **Tech?** Revised drift assist tech, track-friendly dynamic tweaks, *Max Power* bodykit | **Aimed at?** Enemies of fresh tyres | **When can I have one?** Early 2026

20

POLESTAR 5

FIVE IS FINALLY ALIVE

Flat out in Polestar's hotly anticipated Porsche Taycan rival

Words Jake Groves

'We can't simply rely on Porsche drivers suddenly thinking Porsche is a bad idea and them buying a Polestar instead.' Those pragmatic words come from Christian Samson, Polestar's head of vehicle attributes, while I'm throwing the Polestar 5 around Millbrook.

Although we're chatting – and there's no need for raised voices in the hushed cabin of the big electric GT – I'm not hanging around. In fact I may have just got air in this near-finished prototype.

As he holds on and smiles, having spent much of the week going around this Bedfordshire proving ground, Samson continues: 'To really build credibility over time as a performance brand, we need to always satisfy those people who enjoy driving a car – that's fair enough. But we're trying to attract a broader audience.

'So, yes, while the capability of an electric car is wild, we wanted to make it accessible for everyone. We don't want the car to scare people or bite their head off when they try to

Polestar 5
Test vehicle

use it – if you can't control it, then what's the point?' That thinking has led Polestar to focus a lot of development time and effort on how the 5 handles. Beneath the super clean design is Polestar Performance Architecture – a bonded aluminium platform that keeps weight low and torsional rigidity high.

At launch, there will be two versions of the 5: Dual Motor and Performance. Both have a huge 112kWh battery pack, and both use 800-volt architecture that enables charging speeds up to 350kW via rapid DC chargers. Polestar claims a 416-mile WLTP range from the Dual Motor model, and 351 miles from the Performance version.

As for headline acceleration figures, there isn't actually that much difference. The Dual Motor develops 737bhp and 599lb ft, good for a 3.9sec 0-62mph sprint. The Performance model ups that to 871bhp and 749lb ft, dropping the launch time to 3.2sec.

There's more to the Performance model than a 0.7sec improvement in its 0-62mph pace. Larger wheels are standard, and you can swap the standard Michelin Pilot Sport EV tyres for Pilot Sport 5S rubber. Performance models also benefit from semi-active MagneRide dampers and a different chassis tune. Throw in some Swedish Gold trim and you're all set.

The car I'm driving is a Performance model with all the bells and whistles, and it feels mighty quick. I try a few 0-62mph runs for myself, and I'm rewarded with a satisfying punch to the gut. I even manage to beat the claimed 0-62mph time, nailing two separate 2.8sec runs, and ride shotgun as Samson reaches the 5's 155mph top speed around Millbrook's high-speed bowl.

What cuts through most, though, is just how light it feels. The steering, while a little synthetic for my liking, is accurate and well-judged, giving a sense of nimbleness to a car that's five metres long and weighs more than 2.5 tonnes. Body control is tied down and, while taut, the ride is quite possibly the best I've experienced in any Performance-spec Polestar model. The semi-active MagneRide set-up no doubt plays a big part.

Polestar's shooting straight down the middle between the luxurious, technophilic Lotus Emeya and the sharp-yet-sober Porsche Taycan in terms of interior ambience. Like the Polestar 4, this has no rear window, but for the 5 a fresh effort has been made to stop your eyes going fuzzy with its virtual rear-view mirror.

The materials feel top grade – arguably better than in the Taycan – with fabulous levels of adjustment in the sculpted seats. Polestar's infotainment still feels immensely fiddly, mind you.

We got our first glimpse of the 5 back in 2020 with the Precept concept. So while this four-door electric grand tourer isn't surprising or groundbreaking, the 5 is handsome, sprightly and athletic for such a large and heavy car, with some strong performance figures to boot.

Worth the wait? Based on today's bracing on-track experience, I'd say yes.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Polestar's long-awaited four-door GT | **Tech?** Bonded aluminium architecture, 800-volt electrics, clean bodywork that needs no rear wing | **Aimed at?** Lotus Emeya and Porsche Taycan types | **When can I have one?** Order books are open now, with prices starting at £89,500; first deliveries due spring 2026

19

GORDON MURRAY AUTOMOTIVE S1 LM

THE MURRAY REMIX

Gordon Murray has another crack at the McLaren F1 LM

Words Jake Groves

THE SPECIAL ONE

GMA's cars all stick closely to the principles behind the McLaren F1, but the S1 LM goes further in its echoes of Gordon Murray's most famous car. Every surface of the S1 (short for 'special one') is completely new, but with strong resemblance to the F1.

A TOUCH OF MIDAS

Plenty of design nods to the F1 LM, like a central driving position, but the S1 drops the GMA T.50's fan assistance to make space for a new 690bhp 4.3-litre V12. It has an Inconel exhaust, revs to 12,100rpm, and the cover is lined with 18-carat gold foil.

SELF SHIFTER

No dual-clutch or sequential 'box in this first car from Gordon Murray Special Vehicles – just good old-fashioned muscle required. GMA's manual transmission uses elements of the T.50's casing and internals with bespoke details for 'riflebolt throws'.

MORE TO COME

The S1 LM debuts with the less retro Le Mans GTR. 'We are already working on more models and look forward to partnering with the world's most passionate driving enthusiasts to create more automotive works of art,' says Gordon Murray Group CEO Phil Lee.

NEED TO KNOW

| **What is it?** A McLaren F1 LM for 2026 | **Tech?** Old-school aero, central seat, gold-insulated engine bay | **Aimed at?** Those now wealthy enough to actually afford a McLaren F1 | **When can I have one?** First deliveries in early '26

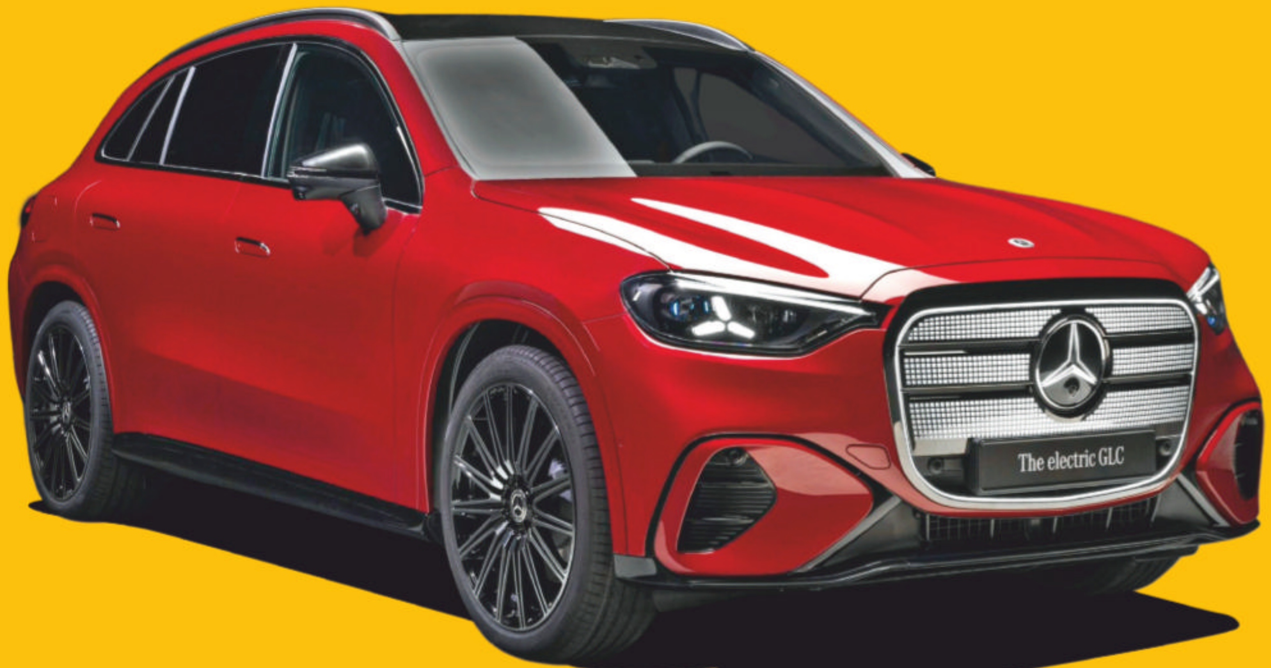
18

■ MERCEDES-BENZ GLC ■

BOOK, COVER ETC.

Ugly? Yes. Clever? Also yes

Words Jake Groves



Is this new GLC everything that's unappealing about modern cars? Or exactly what's being demanded in a part of the world currently exercising a lot of influence over car makers? Either way, the new electric version of the huge-selling Mercedes SUV has a look that's caused quite a stir.

Let's start with the chrome-trimmed elephant in the room; that new grille is an intricate mesh of 942 LED lights and a glowing, chintzy statement that has roots in the 1902 Simplex. Love it or hate it, it's all about brand – putting it quite literally front and centre.

The launch model – the GLC 400 4Matic – sits alongside combustion and hybrid GLCs, and includes a huge 94kWh battery and dual motors. It makes 483bhp and has a WLTP-certified 443-mile range. That impressive efficiency comes in part from the system's 800-volt architecture, assisted by a multi-source heat pump that will be fitted as standard, which should help the GLC not drift too far from its maximum range in colder conditions.

The 800-volt architecture also has other benefits: plug in the right charger, and the GLC 400 takes on 188 miles of electricity in just 10 minutes. A DC converter will be also be thrown in for some countries (whether the UK is included is so far unconfirmed), enabling 400-volt fast charging. Mercedes also says the GLC is prepared for V2G (vehicle to grid) and bi-directional charging, so it'll act as a battery in integrated home systems with solar power, for example.

The wheelbase has stretched over the combustion model, giving more interior space, and it debuts some new tech. There's an optional MBUX Hyperscreen – a 39.1-inch full-width single display, visually modelled on a wave, that incorporates various apps, driver-assistance systems and an AI-enhanced voice assistant. Mercedes has replaced some of the haptic controls mounted on the steering wheel with traditional dials and rockers. Common sense does win occasionally.

As well as the massive info screen, the GLC gets an even bigger flourish of bling. The 'Sky Control' panoramic roof not only makes the cabin feel even larger, it can also be adorned with an optional 162 Mercedes stars. Etched between the layers of glass and insulation, they seem to float in space and can be made to shine one of 64 colours at a time. Not for everyone, of course – just like the looks.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Merc's unfortunate-looking new GLC | **Tech?** Simplex-inspired nose job, largest interior screen ever, huge range | **Aimed at?** China, mainly | **When can I have one?** Launches in the first half of 2026

17

■ RENAULT CLIO ■

FIESTA? WHO?

Renault's next-gen Clio carries the torch of supermini greatness

Words Jake Groves

Renault was surely rubbing its hands together with glee when Ford announced the Fiesta would retire. For decades both superminis were well designed, dynamically enjoyable, affordably priced and big sellers.

And then there was one.

'Clio needs no introduction,' said Renault CEO François Provost at the Munich motor show reveal of the Clio Mk6, just a couple of months into his new job. 'It's one of our emblems of the group and a core part of our identity, as well as one of our greatest commercial successes.' It's topped 17 million sales since 1990.

The new car needs to have enough continuity to please the faithful while also feeling like it belongs in the second half of the 2020s, and it must look distinctive enough to avoid being lost amid the deluge of new models and new brands.

It definitely manages to be distinctive. Its face is aggressive, starring a grille arrangement festooned with Renault diamonds and a new daytime running light signature that's a massive departure from not only the outgoing Clio but also present Renaults such as the Scenic, Rafale and Symbioz. It all adds up to a car that doesn't look all that… Renault.

'We can't do another design evolution – it wouldn't make sense,' said Laurens van den Acker, head of Renault Group design, defending his team's work. 'We needed to push the cursor as far as we can. A lot of people have said it was very risky. But the biggest risk would be not taking the risk.'

Van den Acker said the sales success of the fourth- and fifth-generation Clios was a key reason for making so many design changes for the Mk6. 'It reminded me a bit of Liverpool [FC]. They became champions, so what did they do? Spend €400 million on ▶

WHILE THE EXTERIOR AVOIDS ANY CROSSOVER WITH THE RETRO 5, THE INTERIOR NICKS ITS INFOTAINMENT

Clio meets R5, plus a bit more room in the back

new players. It's not the intuitive thing to do, but they did it anyway.'

While the exterior avoids any retro crossover with the Renault 5, the interior happily nicks most of that acclaimed EV's infotainment set-up and some of the controls. Like the 5 it has Renault's Google-based OpenR infotainment, which includes the ChatGPT-powered voice assistant Reno.

Sitting in the car at its Munich debut, it does feel a bit plusher than the Mk5, with most of the tacky plastics hidden in places you won't look. And unlike the 4 and 5, the Clio's column-mounted gear selector has a Park setting.

Under the skin is the Renault Group's perennial CMF-B architecture. The refinements and improvements are minor, but that makes sense; cars that run on this architecture are pretty sweet to drive already. For the Clio, Renault's engineers have widened the track by 40mm, and a smidge extra wheelbase means better legroom in the back.

The biggest change, though, is the upgraded version of what Renault calls its 'full hybrid E-Tech' powertrain, which now features a 1.8-litre four-cylinder engine and a larger battery pack. It originally launched in the Symbioz and promises better economy as well as a power boost.

It's also claimed that powertrain noise has been improved – a particular sticking point for the Renault Group's complicated, if efficient, hybrid set-up.

'What you'll really be able to feel the difference with is the new gearbox,' says Delphine de Andria, Clio product and platform leader. 'We've added a gear, which adds more substance and power – and helps to lower all of those noises you have with gearchanges.'

Renault claims up to 72.4mpg, CO2 below 90g/km and a 0-62mph time of 8.3sec. Rest easy, though – a turbocharged three-cylinder mated to a manual gearbox will also be available as an entry-level option, if you're happiest in a Clio that keeps it simple.

Renault is also pondering the return of its Renault Sport sub-brand, which presents the intriguing – if far from confirmed – prospect of a sportier Clio Mk6. Fabrice Cambolive, Renault brand CEO, told journalists at Munich that the company is 'exploring some ideas' surrounding sporty models, but not as wild as the 5-based Turbo 3E electric project that went from one-off gymkhana drift car concept to a limited-run, £140k electric supercar.

He said: 'The Group will come up with some proposals in the next 12 months.'

NEED TO KNOW | What is it? Renault's sixth-generation Clio | **Tech?** Upgraded and more powerful hybrid system, Renault 5 interior tech, divisive looks | **Aimed at?** Those in denial about the demise of the Ford Fiesta | **When can I have one?** Goes on sale late next year, but the UK doesn't get it until 2027

CLIO
RE-090-LT

Familiar chassis now wider and slightly longer

16

TOURBILLON

LOVABLE BUG

Mate's masterpiece

You can see why Bugatti's taking its time with the Tourbillon – the V16 hybrid makes the Space Shuttle look about as ambitious as a flint axe. It heralds a very different era for Bugatti under Mate Rimac, replacing ballistic but slightly cold behemoths with a far more touchy-feely driving experience. And what delicious irony that the man we know for world-beating EVs is gifting Molsheim its wildest engine yet.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Cosworth-built V16 in a sleek new body | **Tech?** Dials from a Swiss watch maker | **Aimed at?** Billionaires who want their goosebumps lifting | **When can I have one?** 2026 is the plan

15

RR ELECTRIC

FROM THE TOP

Land Rover plugs in

Land Rover's first EV will be the flagship, and why not? The Range Rover's the perfect fit for electric: the price includes big margins that can soak up some of the extra costs; it's heavy to start with, so batteries won't change its character; and its remit – whisper-quiet roadgoing luxury with serious off-road capability – suits the quiet running and instant torque of e-motors. It looks like the regular car and performs like the V8.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Range Rover's EV | **Tech?** 117kWh battery, twin e-motors, air springs, adaptive dampers | **Aimed at?** Rangie fans | **When can I have one?** Join the queue – 'expressions of interest' are at 60,000

14

McLAREN W1

OUT IN STYLE

End of the old era

The carbon-obsessed Woking maker has merged with start-up Forseven, under the McLaren name, to expand beyond exotic two-seaters. But first there's the W1, successor to the mighty F1 and P1 and effectively McLaren's F80 moment. The all-wheel-drive, hybrid Ferrari, with a 3.0-litre V6, has moved the game on. The W1 – rear wheel-drive, with a hybrid-boosted V8 and 1258bhp – must do the same.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** McLaren's latest hypercar, before it gets all sensible | **Tech?** New V8 plus e-motor | **Aimed at?** F1 and P1 owning completists | **When can I have one?** Early 2026, if you're one of the lucky 399

13

DENZA Z9

AIMING HIGH

Watch very closely

Denza means business. One of its first cars for Europe is a near-1000bhp EV and plug-in hybrid that looks like a Porsche Panamera Sport Turismo (RIP) and seemingly has enough technology to launch its own lunar-bound rocket. It's been shaped by former Seat/Alfa/Audi designer Wolfgang Egger and has motors clever enough to rotate the car into parking spaces (and skim a few millimetres off your rear tyres).

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** A BYD on steroids | **Tech?** Tyre-shredding parking tech, NASA-rivalling computing capabilities, extreme power | **Aimed at?** Those who just want EVERYTHING | **When can I have one?** Mid 2026

12

VW ID. POLO

MINTY FRESH

VW's next EV gets a familiar name, and the first electric GTI will follow

Words Jake Groves

Two is usually better than one. But 2, as it turns out, isn't as good as Polo. So, when VW's next small electric car launches, it will be called not ID. 2 but ID. Polo. Fret not – this isn't going to replace the perennial combustion-powered model, it's just providing an electric alternative.

'Naming has always been a live wire. When I showed the ID. Polo at the plant general meeting – they were the first to see the name plate – the whole place broke out,' says VW brand boss Thomas Schäfer. 'Now we're going to roll this out whenever there's a new product change or new model – it'll be new names from here on, and names we're familiar with.'

VW design chief Andreas Mindt is, as ever, even more enthusiastic: 'My opinion is that you have to have names for Volkswagen. The original Beetle was called the Volkswagen 1200 – that's not a name! But the audience immediately gave it one. Names are so human, and we want to chase this human element.'

Predictable to look at? Almost certainly. A lot of how the new ID. Polo looks is heavily based on the ID. 2all concept, while its

ID.POLO
ID.POLO

sportier sibling – the ID. Polo GTI that's due in the summer – takes all its design details from the ID. GTI concept. Square-ish footprint, squat stance, neat wheel designs and a friendly, familiar face. All very straightforward.

Under the skin is Volkswagen's new MEB+ architecture. As you'll surmise, this is a refreshed version of the platform that underpins every current Volkswagen EV. For the 'electric urban car family' that involves several launches from the wider VW Group at roughly the same time, including the Cupra Raval and Skoda Epiq, this means front-wheel drive from a single e-motor and a lithium iron phosphate (LFP) battery to replace the nickel manganese cobalt (NMC) pack.

VW says the regular ID. Polo will be offered with three power variants – likely between 125bhp and 200bhp. 'A pulled car is safer than a pushed car,' says Mindt. 'I know going sideways all day long can be really fun, but this way is safer for a wider audience. Another reason why front-wheel drive is better is for regenerative braking,' he adds. 'Braking is easier and more efficient with a front-wheel-drive car, so you can collect energy better.'

THE ID. POLO GTI GETS 223BHP TO PLAY WITH – JUST ENOUGH, WITHOUT BEING OVERPOWERED

All MEB+ cars (including the ID. Polo GTI) come with the latest generation of VW's Travel Assist (which bundles adaptive cruise, lane keep and navigation-based data that will slow the car down for corners, junctions etc), as well as matrix LED headlights and optional massage seats.

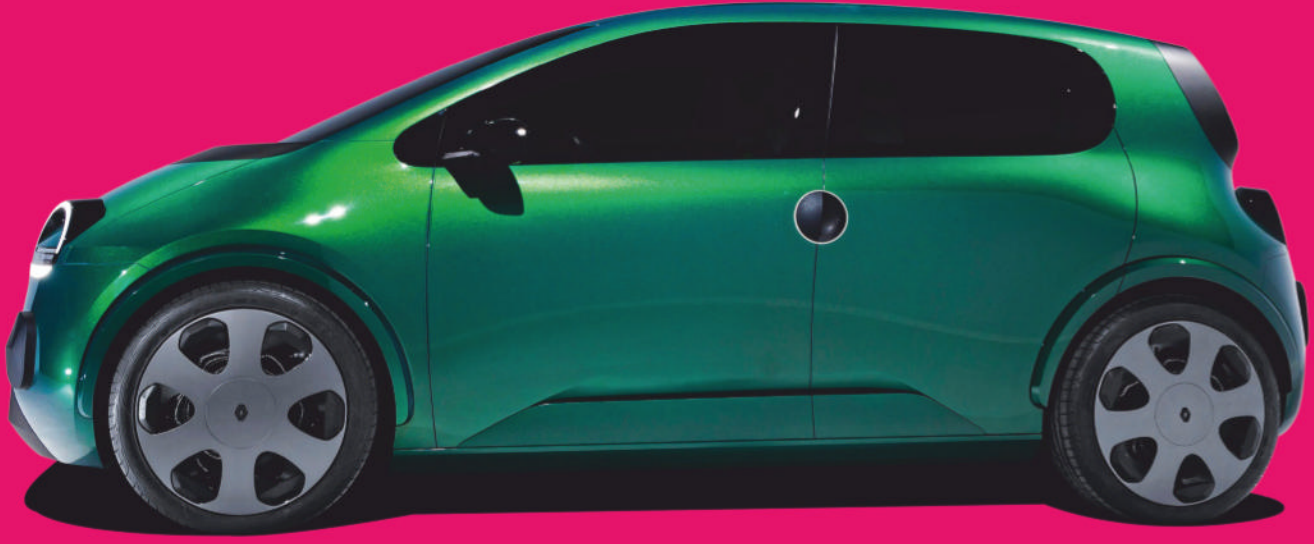
And the ID. Polo GTI? There's 223bhp to play with – just enough, without being overpowered – and VW is also including hardware changes like a locking differential for the driven wheels. The brand's Vehicle Dynamics Manager, as seen on combustion GTIs and Rs, will appear, plus something called GTI Experience Control, which is VW-speak for various drive modes operated via a dial in the cabin.

Mindt says he doesn't want the GTI to be too aggressive to look at. Rather, he let iconic '60s movie Beetle Herbie guide his ideas of how future performance VWs should be seen, including this one. 'I love this humble little car, and yet it was one that beat Ferraris,' he smiles. Mindt points to a certain amount of over-aggression in the design of performance cars and hot hatches. 'With some hot hatch designs out there, I wouldn't drive around in them because I'd feel embarrassed.'

And the name GTI? Usually, it stands for Grand Touring Injection. But, because this is an EV, Volkswagen has tweaked the initials to be Grand Touring Intelligence. Shiver with discomfort at your leisure.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** VW's familiar-sounding Renault 5 rival | **Tech?** New LFP battery, redesigned interior with physical switchgear, GTI comes with locking diff | **Aimed at?** Those put off by the thought of an ID. 2 | **When can I have one?** ID. Polo launches in the spring, with the GTI due in the summer

11



■ RENAULT TWINGO E-TECH ■

RENAULT RIFFS ON THE PAST – AGAIN

It's the Twingo's turn for retro reinvention

Words Piers Ward

It's a good time to be an urbanite. With ultra-compact electric oddities such as the Reva G-Wiz and Mitsubishi i-MiEV thankfully now fading from our memories, upcoming cars such as the Kia EV2 and VW's ID. Lupo/Up are ushering in a fresh era, one of well-designed, technologically advanced small EVs at relatively affordable prices. They should transform our cityscapes into clean, healthy, stylish utopias… assuming the potholes get fixed.

The same could be said of the Renault Twingo, which we've only seen in concept form so far but is being revealed later this year and will be available to buy from 2026, the year before those Korean and German rivals. It comes at a time when Renault can seemingly do no wrong, the 5 and 4 having made a huge difference to its reputation. Is there a more zeitgeisty company?

Technically it's not the first time the Twingo has ditched a fuel tank for a battery cell – the last-gen car was available as an EV in Europe – but this is the first proper ground-up electric Twingo. The cute styling of the concept (pictured) harks back to the Mk1 and is expected to transition to the production version more or less unchanged; spy shots show it to be remarkably similar.

It's on a tweaked version of the same platform as the 5 and 4, so although technical details haven't been released yet, we can guess at around 110bhp and the smaller of the 5's batteries, a 40kWh unit that in the 5 is good for 190 miles. But don't rule out an even smaller battery option for the Twingo, with a range of around 150 miles.

Prices should start under £17,000, helped by the cabin embracing a minimalist vibe. Think funky-coloured cloth seats rather than leather-slathered luxe – just like the '90s original.

Renault has released an image of the concept's interior, and says it's 90 per cent true to the production car. Physical buttons for climate control are likely to be used, as are neat details including magnets in the headrests for fixing a mobile phone in easy view. It's a pared-back, minimalist space in keeping with the car's low price – although we're hoping it includes decent room in the back for adults, unlike the 5.

The less obvious importance of the Twingo is in what it says about Renault's new way of working. With a development time slashed to just 21 months and a vastly reduced list of parts, thanks to the software-driven platform design, the Twingo offers Renault a chance to make city cars profitable again.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Renault's smallest, cheapest EV | **Tech?** Chinese-spec development speed – the car has taken under two years from concept to reality | **Aimed at?** Retro-loving urban hipsters | **When can I have one?** 2026 if you live in Europe; right-hand drive might be later

10

BMW M2 CS

M-PROVING ON PERFECTION

M2 gets CS'd for sharper handling and pace

Words Piers Ward

NOT JUST A DUCKTAIL

There's more to it than that. Power is up by 50bhp to 523bhp from the turbocharged six, with a reworked ECU, stiffer engine mounts and new gear ratios. It's 8mm lower, with bespoke damper and spring tuning, while the steering, brakes and diff have been upgraded.

ADDED LIGHTNESS

The 0-62mph time drops to 3.8 seconds, matching the M3/M4. Extra pace is thanks (in part) to the engine upgrades as well as the CS's 30kg weight loss; extensive use of CFRP panels, lighter forged (and gold) wheels and the titanium exhaust all contribute.

THE LAZY MAN'S M2

There's a new 'Ring record for the car – *of course* there is – but there's no manual gearbox in the CS as it's only available as an eight-speed auto. Mainly because the CS's torque figure has climbed to 479lb ft, that's beyond the manual's tolerances. Cue hand-wringing.

ALL AT A PUNCHY COST

With the M3 CS BMW demonstrated a willingness to pass the extra cost on to the buyer, and the buyer didn't seem to mind. Same here. The M2 starts at £68,975 but the CS jumps by £23,680, a 34 per cent jab to the solar plexus. All that carbonfibre doesn't come cheap.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** A spicier M2 that costs more than the M3 big brother | **Tech?** It's mainly old-school (no electrification here) but a Drift Analyser will rate your skids | **Aimed at?** The M2 owner who must be top dog | **When can I have one?** Now; except it's sold out

9

■ LAND ROVER FREELANDER ■

FROM CHINA WITH LOVE

Jaguar Land Rover leans on Chery to kickstart Freelander as a new electric brand

Words Jake Groves **Illustration** Avarvarii

We're not out of old names yet, it seems, as JLR looks to its Chinese business partner Chery to resurrect a badge we thought was properly dead. Just as Dr Frankenstein screamed 'It's alive!' after flipping the switch, the reborn Land Rover Freelander will be a mish-mash of Land Rover design and Chery technology under the skin.

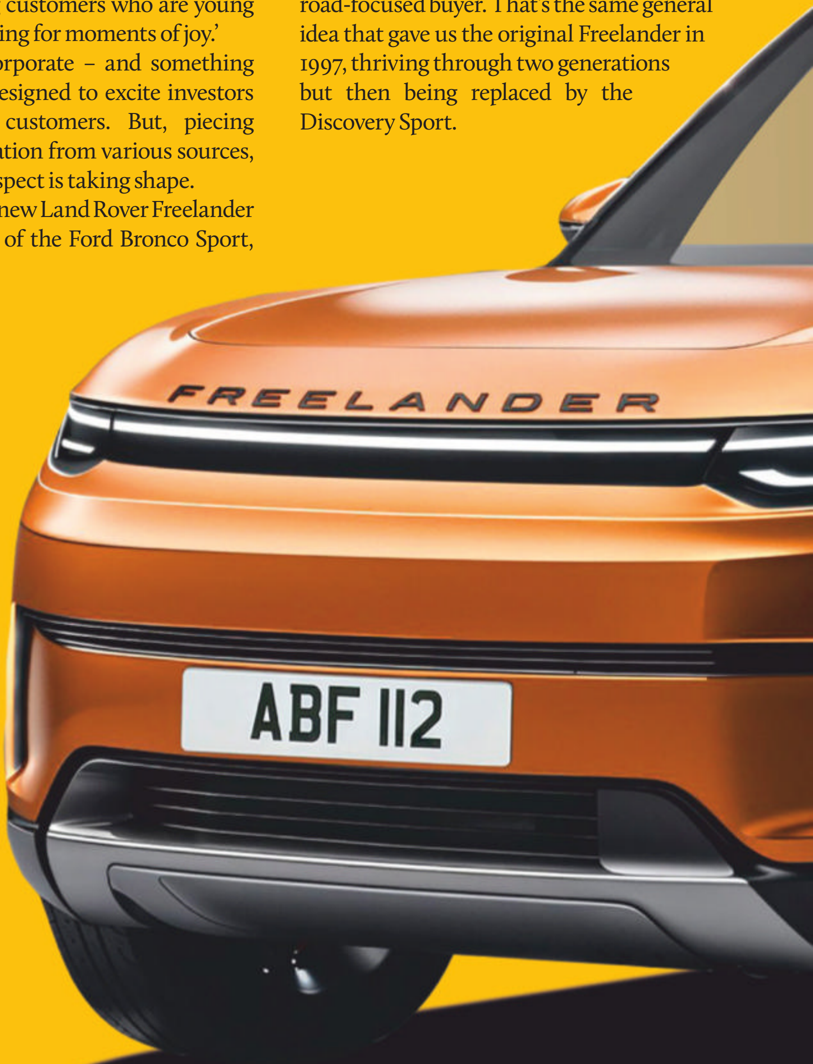
The original idea was floated in 2024 as the two automotive giants announced closer ties for the next era of electrification. At the time, then-CEO of Jaguar Land Rover Adrian Mardell said: 'We believe that working together to develop new models of collaboration for the world's largest and fastest-growing electric vehicle market, combined with the appeal of the Freelander brand, promises a very exciting future.'

All very businessy, and more than a little cryptic. It wasn't until a 2025 investor presentation that more info on Freelander's revival was released.

'The Freelander is set to return,' said Qing Pan, president of JLR China, during that call. 'Under our joint venture with Chery, the new vehicles will reflect the ambition to break free from convention, with innovative engineering, leading ADAS [advanced driver assistance systems] and more smart features. The new Freelander will cater to freedom-seeking customers who are young at heart and looking for moments of joy.'

Again, very corporate – and something that was more designed to excite investors than potential customers. But, piecing together information from various sources, an attractive prospect is taking shape.

We expect the new Land Rover Freelander to echo the look of the Ford Bronco Sport, combined with design cues from the Land Rover Defender, but all aimed at a more road-focused buyer. That's the same general idea that gave us the original Freelander in 1997, thriving through two generations but then being replaced by the Discovery Sport.



IT ECHOES THE DEFENDER AND FORD BRONCO SPORT, BUT FOR ROAD-FOCUSED DRIVERS

Qing Pan said the Freelander will embody 'the original spirit of the Freelander, but brought up to date with a design to appeal to the discerning, technologically-savvy Chinese consumer.'

Yin Tongyue, chairman of Chery Automobile, has confirmed that JLR will use the EoX platform currently deployed by Chery's Exeed brand, which sells hybrid and electric SUVs in China and other markets including Russia. EoX is constructed from aluminium, runs on 800 volts and uses a double-wishbone front, multi-link rear suspension set-up.

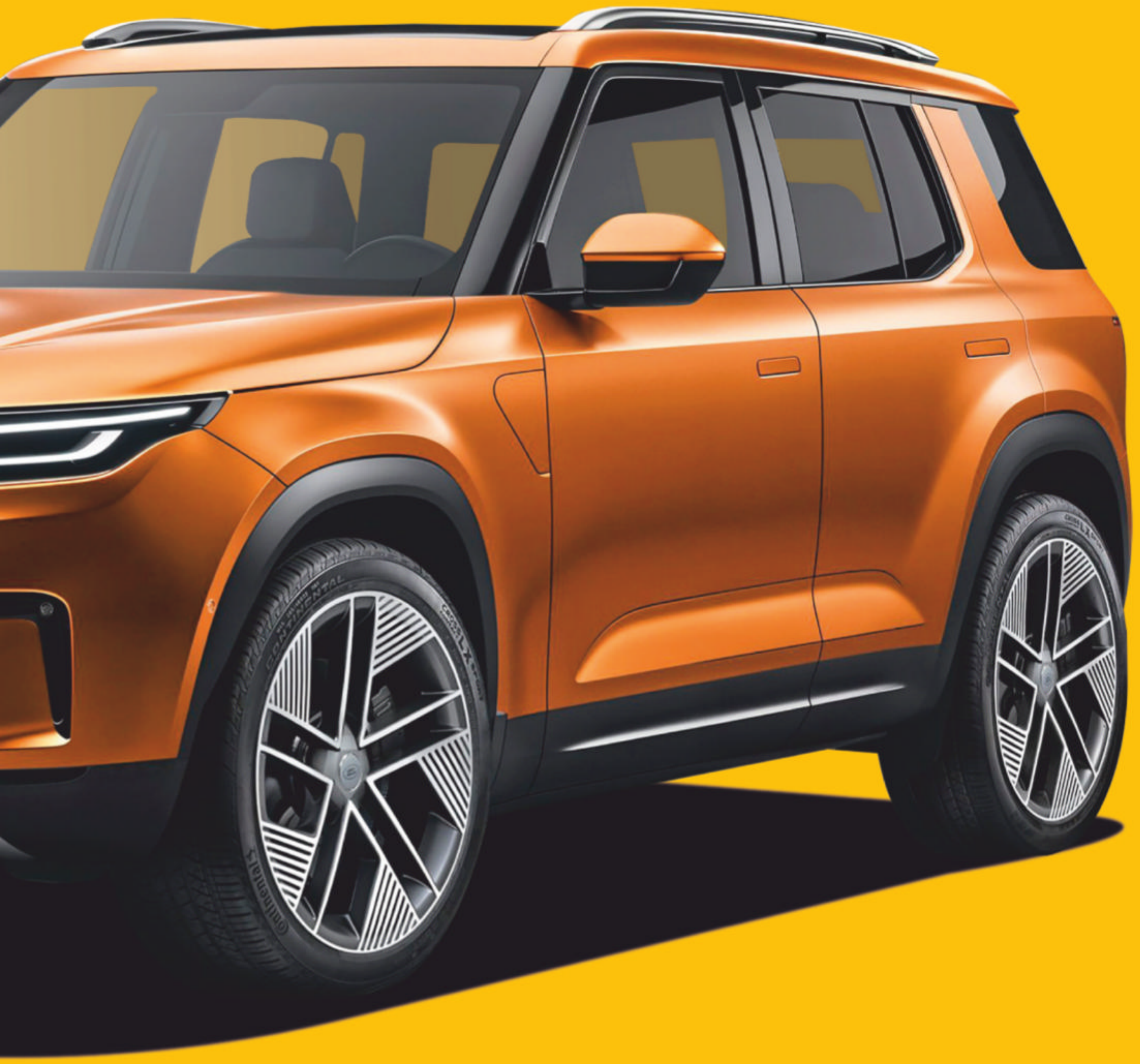
Land Rover will have access to electric power configurations ranging from a 249bhp single-motor rear-driven set-up to twin-motor all-wheel-drive versions with more than 450bhp at their disposal. Exeed also claims that cars using EoX underpinnings are capable of efficiency figures better than five miles per kWh.

Although the platform can house range-extender powertrains, using a turbocharged 1.5-litre engine as a generator, JLR claims to be focusing on battery-electric versions.

Although China – the world's largest EV market – will get the Freelander first, it will almost certainly launch in other markets. 'It holds the potential for global expansion,' Pan said. 'This represents a bold step into a different segment, complementing our existing JLR business and unlocking growth.'

And don't think the returning badge will appear only as a five-door SUV. JLR is looking to establish Freelander as another pillar for its House of Brands, currently consisting of Range Rover, Defender, Discovery and Jaguar.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** The compact Land Rover, reborn | **Tech?** Chery's 800-volt E0X electric and range-extender platform; a huge jump in software sophistication | **Aimed at?** Millennials who have no idea what the original was like | **When can I have one?** Launches in China in 2026; Europe in 2027 at the earliest



8

■ LAMBORGHINI TEMERARIO SPYDER ■

BULL STEAM AHEAD

A droptop version of Lambo's latest leads a new-car onslaught from the in-form Italians

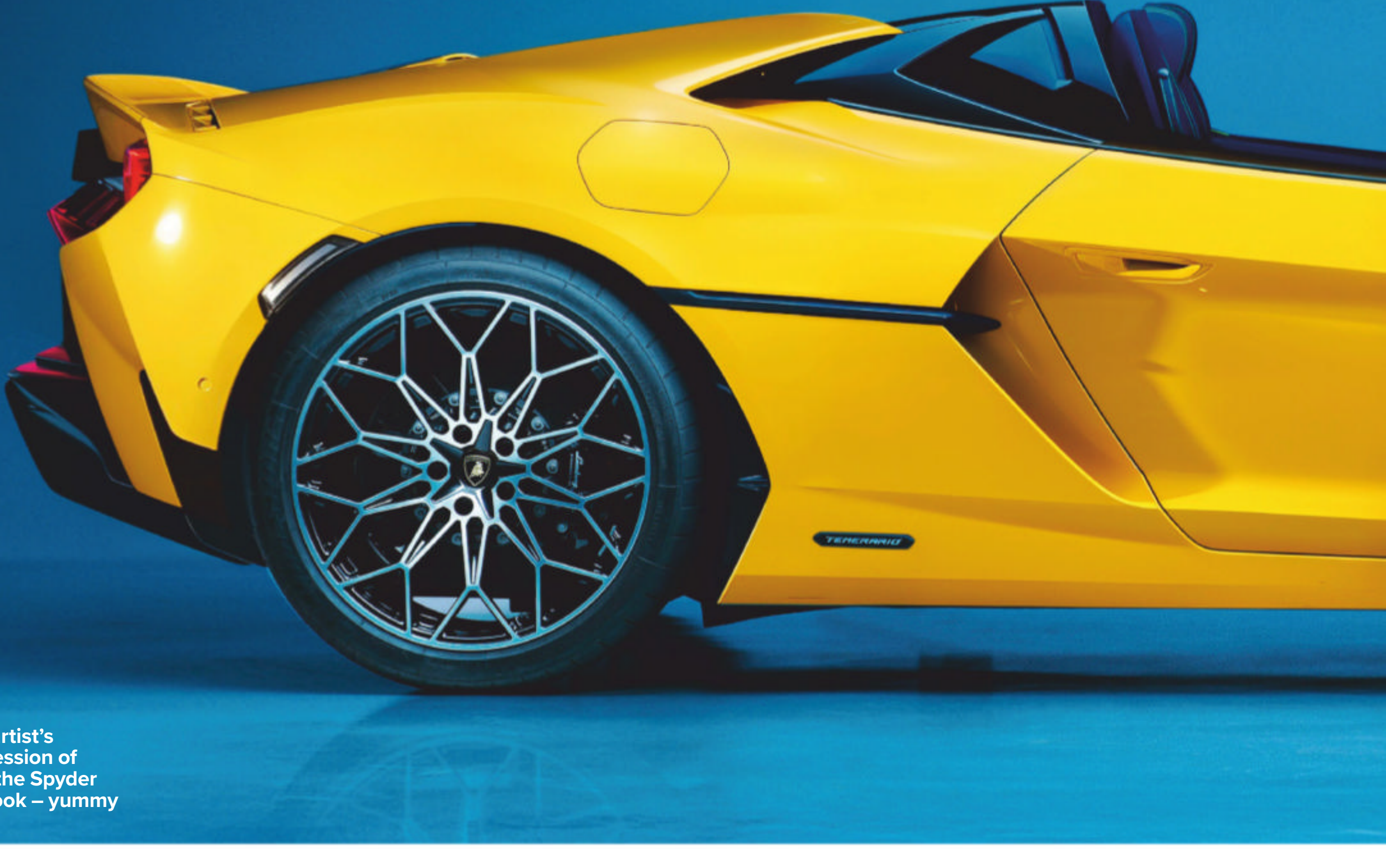
Words Georg Kacher **Illustration** Avarvarii

Although the European car industry is going through a rough time, Lamborghini can do no wrong; 2024 was a record year for the Italian manufacturer, with more than 10,500 cars delivered and a 27 per cent operating margin. Ferrari's was better still, yes (28.3 per cent), but that number eclipses those of Bentley and Porsche.

While Porsche is in a muddle, Lamborghini is going from strength to strength. The waiting list for the sought-after Revuelto stretches from Sant'Agata almost to the Adriatic coast, the brand new Temerario is fully spoken for through 2026, and the seven-year-old, finally-hybridised Urus continues to surpass even the most outlandish sales projections.

Remember that the company was tentatively up for grabs under previous VW Group CEO Herbert Diess; what a mistake that would have been. It has since become a true crown jewel – more performance focused than Ferrari, more emotional than McLaren and more hardcore than Aston. During his second tenure, mastermind Stephan Winkelmann has created a massively profitable multi-billion asset for the Porsche and Piëch families.

What's next for Sant'Agata? Naturally, a Temerario Spyder. It makes sense to launch this next, as the Spyder version of its predecessor, the Huracan, contributed so much to the bottom line. Expect a soft-top



Our artist's impression of how the Spyder will look – yummy

rather than a retractable hardtop, for reasons of weight, packaging and centre of mass, as well as a redesigned rear engine cover area likely to include some buttressing behind the seats to improve roof-down aero.

And where the Huracan and Gallardo before it used aluminium monocoques, Lambo's investment in a carbonfibre tub across the Temerario and Revuelto promises open-top fun with no real drop-off in chassis rigidity and only the smallest increase in weight. We may have to wait a while, mind, as the Spyder may not arrive until the very end of 2026, if not later.

Variants of the Revuelto are expected to launch from 2028 onwards, when the electrified V12 hypercar is due for its first refresh. Lamborghini would love to launch them sooner, but parent Audi has vetoed them as too costly and too soon, particularly given the Revuelto seems significantly under-priced compared to rivals.

Winkelmann quickly learned from the mistakes made by other premium car makers, not least Porsche. Instead of following Zuffenhausen's risky electric-first strategy, he has supported the electrification of combustion models but remains cautious about pure-electric ones, as those wealthy enough to afford an electric Lambo simply don't want one.

Right now, both the Lanzador (first shown two years ago in concept form and originally due in 2028) and the proposed Urus EV earmarked for 2029 are on hold. Both were to use the breakthrough Scalable Systems Platform conceived by Porsche, plus a variation of the software stack created by the joint venture with Rivian.

> **WINKELMANN HAS CREATED A MASSIVELY PROFITABLE MULTI-BILLION ASSET FOR THE PORSCHE AND PIËCH FAMILIES**

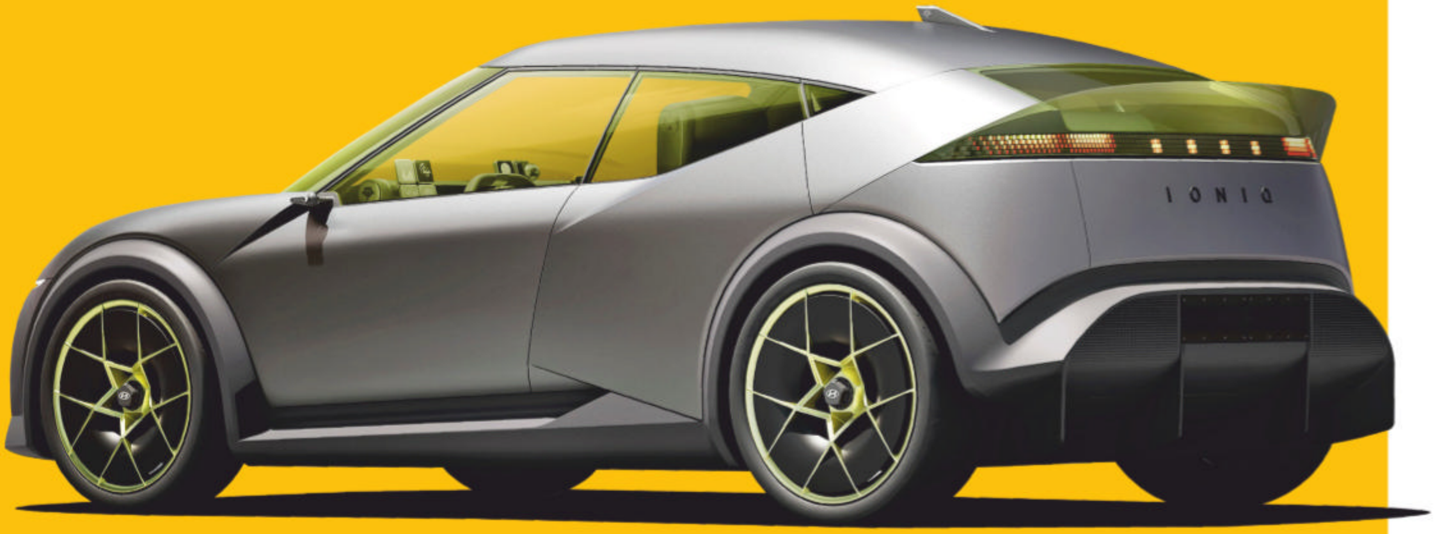
If they do ever materialise, they may not make it as battery-electric vehicles. The solution may turn out to be range extenders; Cupra has already demonstrated that the SSP platform can run with such a powertrain, at least in concept guise.

And what of the Urus, that irrepressible cash cow? It may well remain in production through to 2036, perhaps even 2040, depending on emissions regulations. A similar lifecycle extension may apply to the (non-electric) Porsche Cayenne, which will be facelifted twice and restyled once over the next decade, our sources now expect.

The Urus SE is set to undergo minor modifications next year, when we are likely to see the brawnier new Performante. The plug-in hybrid powertrain will receive a performance boost along with a bigger battery. Insiders also predict more eye-catching light signatures, more aggressive aero aids, bigger wheels and an upgraded interior. If it pays for more soul-stirring supercars, that works for us.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Lamborghini's open-top V8 supercar | **Tech?** Flatplane-crank hybrid V8, sky-high redline, trick drift tech | **Aimed at?** The Lambo faithful – this will be just as loud, showy and spicy as they are | **When can I have one?** We might see it very late next year, but it'll go on sale in 2027

7



HYUNDAI IONIQ 3

THE MAGIC NUMBER

Hyundai's smallest Ioniq yet will look properly wild

Words Ted Welford

It looks bigger than it should, but this Concept Three from Hyundai shows off an all-new electric supermini named Ioniq 3. It's being described as an 'aero hatch,' and it's got its sights set on the Renault 5.

The Concept Three has spawned from Hyundai's latest design language, named 'Art of Steel' (fun fact: Hyundai Group is the only car maker to produce its own steel). It's not the first time this design language has been shown as it debuted on last year's Initium Concept, which evolved into the chunky second-generation Hyundai Nexo hydrogen fuel cell car. 'I was having an 11pm phone call at home [with our designers], curving pieces of steel and this is what generated this design language' says Simon Loasby, head of Hyundai's design centre, describing the thinking behind it all.

Loasby was also smart when it came to kickstarting the entire Concept Three project: 'I printed images out and put them on my desk in the studio in Seoul because I knew SangYup Lee [global design chief of Hyundai and Genesis] would walk past and he would stop. He did just that and said "holy sh*t, what's that?!" and I said: "this is what we're doing for a project for Europe."' Loasby says Lee approved the project instantly.

The yellow colouring on the concept is designed to highlight the upcoming Ioniq 3 production car's distinguishing features; a cool window line, spoiler lip and beefy alloy wheels are all expected to make it past the concept stage. Its racy look is also a wink and a nod to a potential N variant, too.

Under the skin will be Hyundai Group's now well-established E-GMP architecture, making this the smallest car it's launched on so far. The Ioniq 3 is also likely the first production model to debut an entirely new software setup for Hyundai cars, named Pleos. As well as enabling new-generation driver assistance tech and AI-assisted features, Pleos Connect – the name for the infotainment that'll launch on the Ioniq 3 – uses Android Automotive as a base and is said to be much more customisable than before. Worry not, though – Loasby is keen to keep plenty of physical switches inside. Phew.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** | A sporty supermini with dramatic styling | **Tech?** Pixels everywhere, trusty 800-volt e-GMP platform, new 'Pleos' operating system | **Aimed at?** Super-connected young'uns | **When can I have one?** Production car arrives autumn 2026

6

LANCIA DELTA HF INTEGRALE

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Lancia's little red mascot is no longer endangered

Words Jake Groves **Illustration** Avarvarii

LANCIA'S REVIVAL

After Ypsilon, comes Delta. It's expected to be a Golf-sized hatchback that brings the brand's dramatic new look onto a larger family car. As well as a sporty HF-Line trim (think of that like BMW's M Sport or Audi's S Line), a high-performance Delta HF is confirmed.

HF STAYS ELECTRIC

The Delta will run on Stellantis' STLA Medium platform, allowing for hybrid and EV versions. Like the Ypsilon HF, the Delta HF is expected to be BEV-only. STLA Medium EVs can have dual-motor setups, with power north of 400bhp. Range claims reach 400 miles.

SPORTING HERITAGE

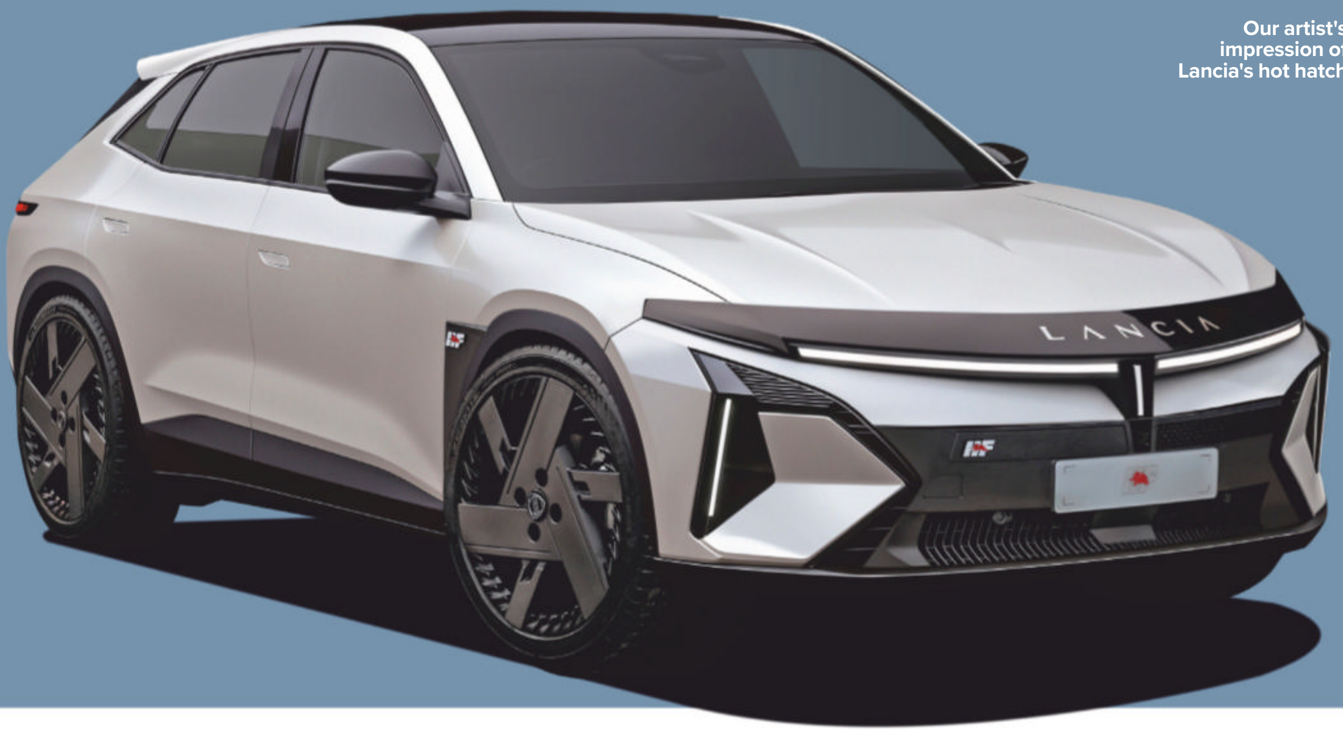
Is new-gen HF just for show? Lancia says no. The brand – arguably best known for its Delta S4 and 037 dominating in rallying – is getting dirty once again. Rally2 iterations of the smaller Ypsilon HF are entering competition, backing up the HF name with proper sporting intent.

NOT DONE YET

As well as the Delta, Lancia's product launch will also include a new Gamma, which will likely be a coupe crossover like the DS N°8 and Peugeot 408. CAR's intel also suggests the revival of the Aurelia name, which could also morph into an SUV.

NEED TO KNOW

| **What is it?** Lancia's most famous car, resurrected | **Tech?** STLA Medium platform, wild design elements, long-range battery and loads of power | **Aimed at?** European fashionistas in a hurry | **When can I have one?** Summer 2026, but likely not for the UK...



Our artist's impression of Lancia's hot hatch

5

PORSCHE 911 TURBO S

AN ELECTRIFYING PERFORMANCE

We hitch a ride in the fastest production Porsche 911 yet

Words James Dennison

Back when the 992.2 911 Carrera GTS launched in 2024, its innovative T-Hybrid system grabbed the headlines. Lighter than equivalent plug-in hybrids yet still delivering ludicrous performance (it's only a tenth of a second slower to 62mph than a Ferrari 296 GTB), it raised some intriguing questions about what would happen when the tech inevitably made its way into faster models.

Here's the answer. The 992.2 Turbo S takes the T-Hybrid principle – a small battery, just 1.9kWh, an electric motor in the eight-speed PDK transmission, and an eTurbo on the flat-six – and pushes it even further by using two smaller eTurbos. Where the GTS gains 53bhp from the electrical assistance, the Turbo S notches this up to 83bhp.

Combined output is 701bhp and 590lb ft of torque (60bhp more than the previous Turbo S). It does 0-62mph in 2.5sec (two tenths faster than the 992.1) and 0-124mph in 8.4sec (half a second quicker). Does that explain the 7min 3.92sec Nürburgring lap time – some 14 seconds faster than the 992.1? To an extent, yes. Apparently Porsche itself was surprised by the number, having expected 7min 7sec or 8sec. But what's made the real difference is not the size of the increase in power, but rather its availability.

Whereas the 992.1 Turbo S delivered peak power at 6750rpm, the hybrid system in the 992.2 broadens this to between 6500 and 7000rpm. And it's the same story with torque – 2500-4000rpm becomes 2300-6000rpm. Expanding the availability of the peak performance means that, despite the power-to-weight ratio only improving by a small margin (to 406bhp per tonne) the 992.2 is able to monster its old lap time.

We get first-hand evidence of just how effective the 992.2 Turbo S is during a few laps around Weissach's on-site test track with Jörg Bergmeister. He knows a thing or two about driving 911s, having won five American Le Mans Series championships in one, and promptly throws us into the first corner (a long, medium-width right-hander) with abandon.

As we pitch effortlessly into precision oversteer, Bergmeister grins and balances the throttle – power instantly going to all four wheels and holding the slide. 'You couldn't do this in the old car,' he claims as we hook up and slingshot out the other side, making it clear he credits the way he's able to call upon the new car's vast reserves of shove without delay.

Regardless of engine speed, the electric motor between the turbos' compressor and turbine wheel (attached directly to the turbine shaft) is able to spin up to 145,000rpm (up from 125,000rpm in the GTS) almost instantaneously and deliver the sort ▶

PORSCHE
Turbo S
S ZT 911
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THERE'S AN EERIE CALMNESS TO DIRECTION CHANGES. IT FEELS BRILLIANTLY COMPOSED AND EFFECTIVE

of responses Bergmeister craves. 'You can drive it like a naturally-aspirated car,' he exclaims as we exit a third-gear corner, rear end squatting down to deliver that famous 911 traction.

All those electrical components mean the Turbo S is neither cheap (£199,100 for the coupe, £209,100 for the cabriolet) nor light at 1740kg. That's 85kg more than the previous Turbo S and 261kg heavier than a 992.2 GT3. Porsche reckons a plug-in hybrid system would have easily breached the 1.8-tonne mark.

Further weight saving has been achieved with the new titanium exhaust system (less back pressure, and saves 6.8kg), while the new 3.6-litre engine (slightly smaller than the 992.1) has a lighter valvetrain and crankcase as well as new pistons and a different compression ratio.

It's difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about the combustion aspect of the powertrain from our passenger ride, not least because Bergmeister is determined to focus on showing off the hybrid tech.

The benefits of a 400-volt electrical system are not confined to the powertrain. It means Porsche can integrate its ehPDCC system (electrohydraulically controlled Porsche Dynamic Chassis Control). This essentially reduces roll and works with cross-connected active coupling rods, whereby pressure is built up by oil volume flow depending on the driving situation. The stabilisers therefore keep the car better supported and more level, while also, in theory, improving comfort.

Being thrown around by a racing driver means the jury is out on the latter point, but there's an eerie calmness to how the Turbo S makes direction changes. It's not as raw and knife-edge sharp as a GT3; instead it feels brilliantly composed and effective. Just like a Turbo S should.

New tyre compounds from Pirelli and Goodyear offer improved dry-weather performance, as do larger rear brakes and tyres. At 410mm, the discs make this the largest PCCB system Porsche has ever fitted to a two-door model.

The Turbo S has a new active aero system, building on the active front and rear spoilers of the 992.1, that includes vertical cooling slats in the bumper that can close to protect the discs from excess water. An active front diffuser helps control lift and drag. The upshot is a drag coefficient that's improved over its predecessor when in its most slippery configuration.

It's about as comprehensive an overhaul is you'll see for what is supposed to be a heavy facelift. There's one thing missing, though: Porsche won't be launching the new Turbo alongside the Turbo S, although it isn't ruling out a debut later down the line.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** The quickest production 911 yet | **Tech?** T-Hybrid system, electro-hydraulic dynamic chassis control, active aero | **Aimed at?** Power junkies | **When can I have one?** Order one now for a smidge under £200k, just in time for the new year

4

ELECTRIC ALPINE A110

WORTH THE WEIGHT

Light, responsive, good range and handsome – Alpine's electric A110 is big on promise

Words Luke Wilkinson **Illustration** Avarvarii

Alpine has a delicate few years ahead. Its distinctive style of zippy, blue-hued performance will be applied to a broader range of models than we've been used to. For a long time, of course, Alpine was one car: the agile and adorable A110. Now, though, Alpine is in the middle of a product offensive, with the R5-based A290 hatch on sale and the A390 due soon. But the one we're most excited about is due in 2026: an electric replacement for the A110.

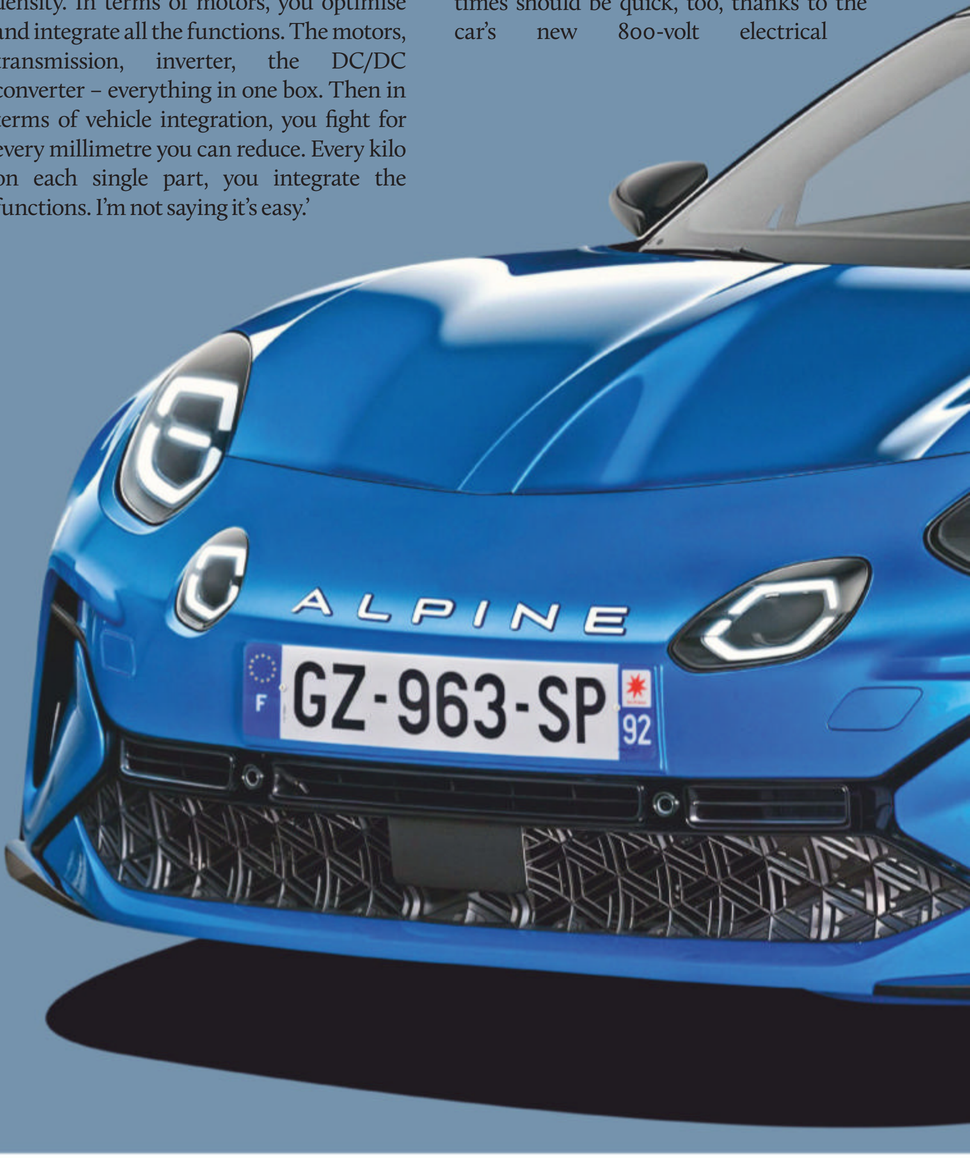
That presents multiple challenges to Alpine, whose reputation is built on lightweight engineering. The A390, for example, weighs 2.1 tonnes – and that's one of the sleekest, lowest cars in the segment. The problem is one faced by all car manufacturers: how to reduce weight without reducing battery capacity and thereby limiting the car's range to an unacceptable degree.

CEO Philippe Krief promises the electric A110 won't give up on less being more. He says the target weight is 1.45 tonnes, close to revered piston-engined cars like Porsche's 718 Boxster and Cayman duo. To put that figure into perspective, the current A110 weighs a little over 1100kg, while the lightest MG Cyberster clocks in at almost 1900kg.

Kreif's ambitious target has caused plenty of engineering headaches. He reels off some of the solutions: 'You use battery cells that are high – very high – energy density. In terms of motors, you optimise and integrate all the functions. The motors, transmission, inverter, the DC/DC converter – everything in one box. Then in terms of vehicle integration, you fight for every millimetre you can reduce. Every kilo on each single part, you integrate the functions. I'm not saying it's easy.'

Does the focus on low weight compromise the range? 'No, that would be too easy,' responds Krief. He claims the A110 EV will have a range 'close to 600km' (around 370 miles), which would make it every bit as usable as its predecessor. Charge times should be quick, too, thanks to the car's new 800-volt electrical

> THE AIM IS TO INSTIL A FEELING OF LIGHTNESS THROUGH CHASSIS TUNING AND INTELLIGENT TORQUE VECTORING



architecture. That should allow the battery to charge from 10 to 80 per cent capacity in less than 20 minutes.

One thing Krief won't confirm is exactly where the batteries will be mounted. He says: 'If you put them underneath, the car is too high. And so we have to find a different space.' We suspect the batteries will be positioned low and behind the occupants, about where the engine is in the current car – much like the plan for the batteries in the electric Porsche 718 twins.

Krief is confident the EV's handling will not be a disappointment. Alpine's aim is to instil a 'feeling of lightness' through clever chassis tuning and intelligent dual-motor torque vectoring on the rear axle that can help rotate the car into corners and offset the massive inertia of the battery pack.

He's confident drivers will accept the car: 'What we are trying to do is to sell pleasure, exclusivity, premiumness – and you can do that with electric. We are not selling electric cars, you know? We are selling sporty cars, passion cars, exclusive cars that are electric.'

What is he hoping the reaction will be from those who drive it? 'There won't be any doubt about the fact that the car is an Alpine. Any doubt whatsoever.'

There is, however, a plan B in case the path to our electric-only future takes another detour. The ace up Alpine's sleeve is that the Alpine Performance Platform (APP) that underpins the electric A110 is also capable of housing a combustion powertrain. 'One thing we learn now is that, especially in the last 10 years, things are changing so quickly – and you need to react quickly,' says Krief. 'APP is a platform that needs to run for, I would say, nine years.'

There's nothing new about multi-energy platforms – the Stellantis group, for instance, has embraced the idea wholeheartedly. Krief thinks the results have too often been compromised, but vows that won't apply here. 'In the case of APP we can install a combustion [powertrain] with a low technical impact. This package gives us protection.'

Alpine plans to offer at least two more models running on APP, to maximise the new architecture's potential. After the new-generation A110, Alpine is planning an A110-based roadster – an obvious petrol-engined A110 variant Alpine never released – and an A310 grand tourer, a 2+2 that will take on the likes of Porsche's 911 and the Mercedes-AMG GT.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** Next-generation Alpine sports car | **Tech?** Lightweight battery construction, dual-motor torque vectoring, hyper-alert control weights | **Aimed at?** Alpine fans who think the A390 is a bit tubby | **When can I have one?** Likely to launch at the end of the year

Our vision of an electric A110 – Alpine's designers won't rock the boat too much

3

BMW i3 NEUE KLASSE

NEUE KLASSE, OLD MAGIC

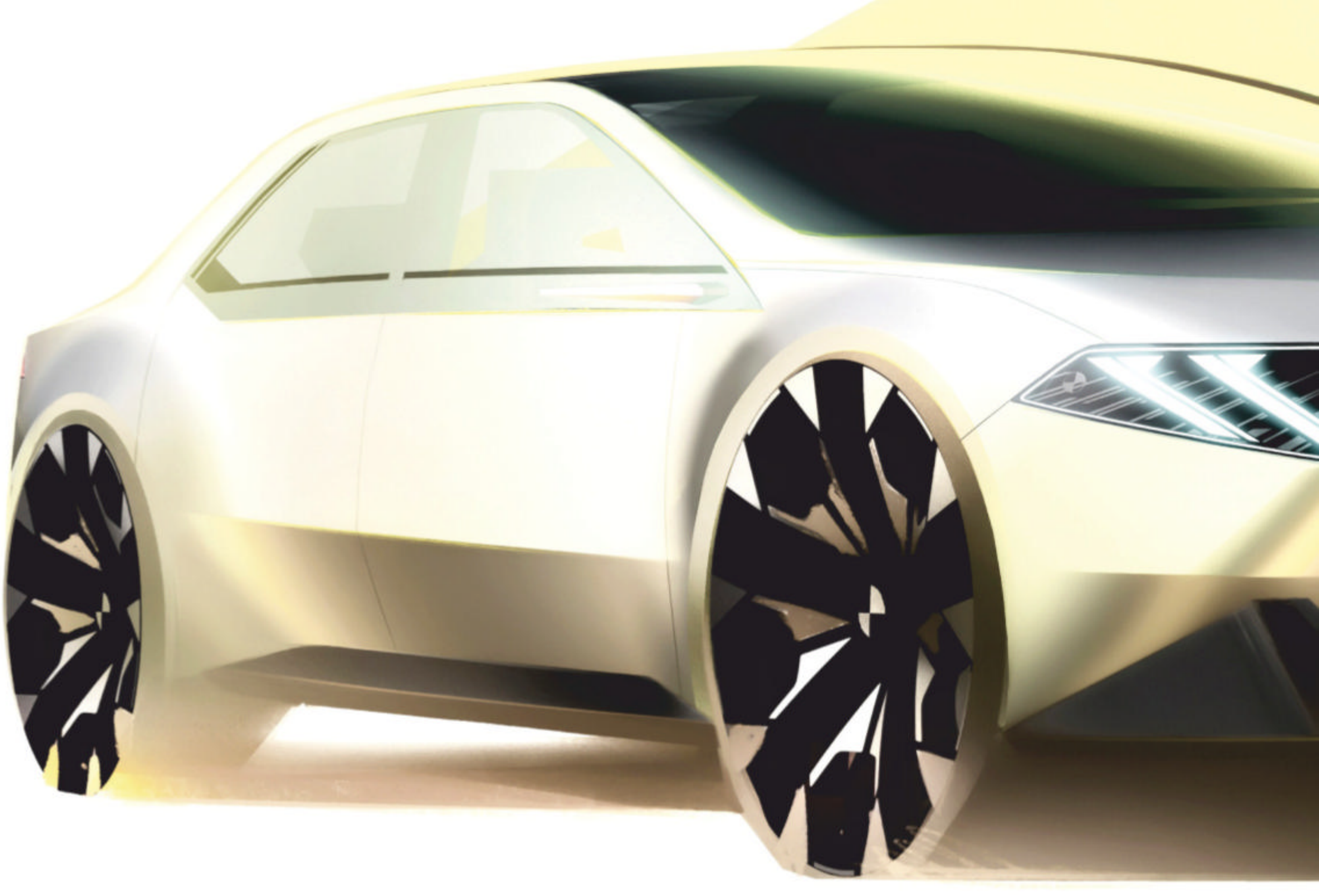
The all-electric 3 – if BMW gets this wrong then we should all just pack up and go home

Words Ben Miller

You can see why BMW's pioneering its 'Neue Klasse' era with the SUV, the recently unveiled iX3. It'll surely sell in greater numbers and make more money. But its appeal is more cerebral than emotional. You don't look at it and dream of driving it.

Not so the saloon. A more comfortable fit with BMW's new design language and truer to its heritage, the electric Neue Klasse 3-series – confirmed to use the name i3 – works. You can imagine it as an efficient mile-muncher, fast-charging and motorway grinding. And you can imagine it as an M3, with an e-motor on each wheel, re-writing all known laws of physics and one or two we've not yet found.

Given much of the BMW legend is built on great engines, it's worth focusing on the battery-electric technology in the Neue 3, which is set for a 2026 premiere. A lighter, more efficient and more energy-dense toolkit than its current tech, BMW describes its Gen6 powertrain as a 'quantum leap' – as you'd expect given it'll go into the



first BMW EV to wear a proper M badge.

The headline claims for the new 800-volt battery technology, which switches from prismatic-type cells to lithium-ion cylinders, are a 30 per cent increase in range (with some future models going further still), a 20 per cent increase in overall vehicle efficiency and a massive 40-50 per cent cost reduction versus a comparable Gen5 powertrain (the new iX3 starts at about £7k less than the car it replaces, for example).

It's claimed Gen6 also delivers gains in terms of packaging efficiency. The new battery is flatter than before, making it compatible even with low-slung M cars, and has no internal modules thanks to direct, 'cell-to-pack' construction. Versus Gen5 packs, the battery's external mountings are simpler and lighter, and Neue Klasse cars will use the battery as a stressed member.

Just as different engine architectures better suit different applications, so BMW's using a mixed approach, with more expensive, high-performance EESM (electrically excited synchronous motor) units on the rear axle and more cost-effective and compact ASM (asynchronous motor) units on the front. BMW's rating the 120kg rear units at 197bhp to 296bhp and the 70kg fronts at 118bhp to 178bhp.

So far, we know Gen6 BMWs will use an EESM motor module on the rear axle and the ASM unit up front, for all-wheel drive, but it has confirmed the Gen6 toolkit can be used to create cars with three or even four e-motors. The fact that M's been running a circa-1300bhp, quad-motor electric M3 prototype for a while would suggest M's Neue Klasse cars will use the more high-performance EESM units throughout.

Rest assured, too, that M won't be using off-the-shelf standard kit, despite the umbrella Gen6 descriptor.

'We will have our own motors,' M boss Frank van Meel tells *CAR*. 'We call them Gen6 because in the same way that today we have the S58 engine, which is based upon the B58 six-cylinder inline engine, we always try to use the [BMW] manufacturing lines and to base [M technology] upon series-production units. But we have our own motors, and the good thing about the Neue Klasse was that we started all these discussions from scratch.

'We explained that, just as we have derivatives like the S58 with M-specific requirements, sometimes [on EV tech] we would need to split up a little bit because we couldn't find a solution that worked for us. But the solution we found could be integrated into the Gen6 production lines and be based upon the same principles. So we have high-performance engines that we can make on the same lines.'

If all this talk of potent, bespoke powertrains has you thinking the Neue 3 might be quite good to drive, well, same here. Thank BMW's 'Heart of joy' control module: rather than a dozen separate ECUs, all decision making – on throttle, brakes, steering and stability control – is handled by one master chip, for what's claimed to be a lag-free and cohesive driving experience.

We've ridden in a prototype and, three months on, only just stopped grinning. Despite the obvious weight issues inherent in a quad-motor, big battery powertrain, rotation is clean, agility eye-popping and there's none of the inertia you'd expect of a car that surely weighs more than two tonnes. Where the opportunity arose, it loved to get smoothly out of shape, motors screaming, wheel cocked on opposite lock.

Plus ça change.

NEED TO KNOW | **What is it?** The compact saloon rebooted for the all-electric era | **Tech?** Hard to know where to start, but Panoramic iDrive – a thin sliver of screen right around the base of the windscreen – is fabulous | **Aimed at?** Everyone; that's the point | **When can I have one?** Very late 2026/early 2027 – the M3 will follow in 2028

LIGHTER AND MORE EFFICIENT THAN ITS CURRENT TECH, BMW CALLS IT A QUANTUM LEAP

2

PORSCHE 718 BOXSTER & CAYMAN

BETS, HEDGED

Originally EV-only, now with combustion options, too – phew

Words Ben Miller **Illustration** Lars Sältzer

BACK FROM THE BRINK

Porsche's battery-only sports cars got the nod when the EV future was more nailed on. After a heap of supply issues, they're finally due. But boss Oliver Blume has seen the writing on the wall, citing 'a clear drop in demand' for EVs. So combustion 718s will come, too.

POWER PLAY

For the electric models, expect a big power jump – probably above 400bhp. All-wheel drive is likely, with a third e-motor up front providing superior traction and extreme regen under braking. GTS and GT4 versions are now expected to keep the flat-six.

THE THRILL OF E-DRIVING

Porsche is cutting itself no slack here – the EVs must move the game on and be fun to drive. Batteries are mounted low and around – rather than beneath – the seats, dropping the driving position and centre of gravity. Twin rear e-motors promise mind-blowing agility.

SOUND OF MUSIC

Porsche is well down the road with the development of a synthetic gearshift on EVs. Like Hyundai's N e-Shift, the Porsche set-up delivers much of the fun and drama of paddleshifting your way up through gears. It could make all the difference to how the electric 718s land.

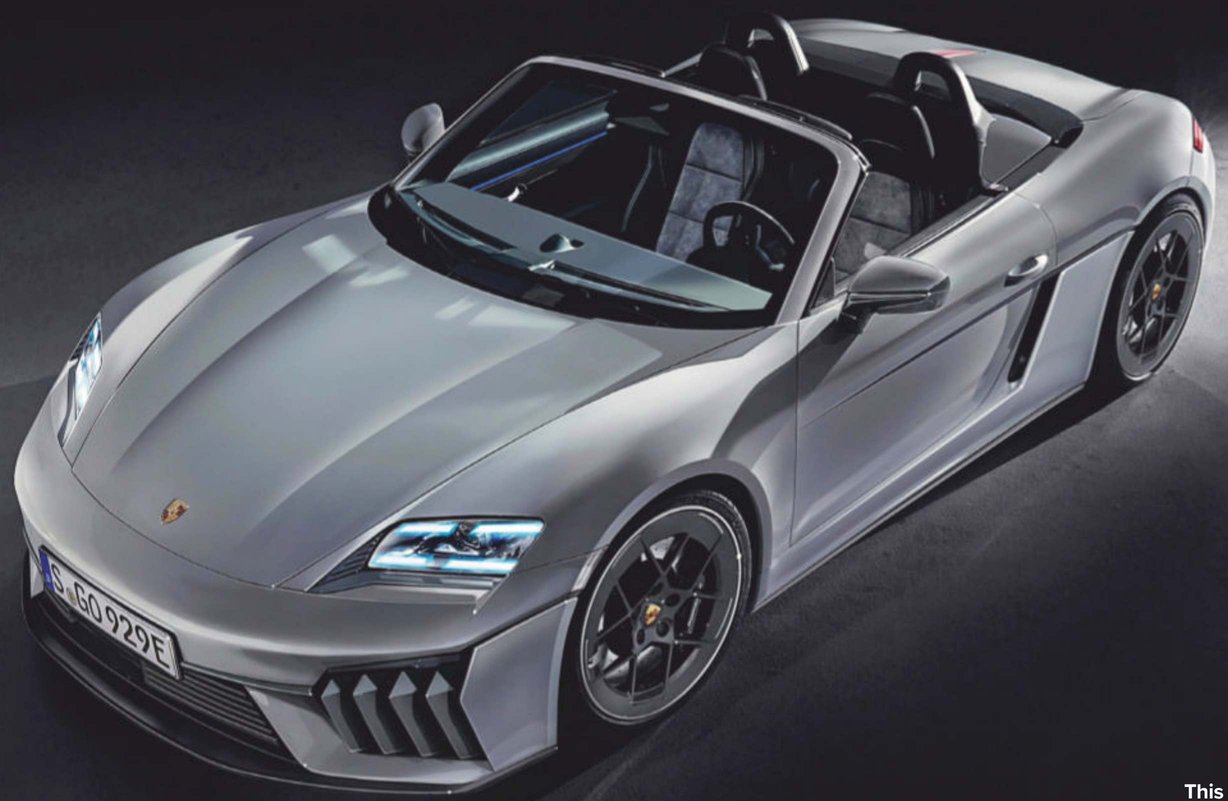
NEED TO KNOW

What is it? The Boxster you know and love, now optionally electric

Tech? EVs get 800-volt electrics and twin rear e-motors; GTS and GT4 likely to keep the flat-six

Aimed at? All of us reading this, frankly

When can I have one? They finally arrive in 2026



This is how we expect the e-Boxster to look

1

FERRARI 849 TESTAROSSA

TESTAROSSA RETURNS! (KIND OF)

Ferrari's plug-in hybrid SF90 is gone, replaced by the similar but different 849 Testarossa. Can it cash the cheques its legendary name so generously writes?

Words Ben Miller

We should probably deal with the elephant in the room – *l'elefante nella stanza,* if you will. Ferrari's new Testarossa looks nothing like a Testarossa. Anyone expecting Ferrari's equivalent of Lamborghini's divine Sian-based Countach reboot may require counselling to get through the heartbreak – heartbreak that could have been avoided simply by not using one of the most emotive names in Maranello's big box of highly emotive names.

Let's deal with the easy bit of the name first: 849. There are eight cylinders, and if you divide the engine's displacement by eight you get something like 49 decilitres. Done. Testarossa? First used in the '50s on ▶

racers like the 1956 500 TR, it came to be synonymous with Ferrari's most powerful engines – and the new car's powertrain is certainly potent. Ferrari's second line of reasoning is that the Testarossa, the 1984 Paris motor show stunner, was forward-looking, like the new car. Hmm.

We collared chief design officer Flavio Manzoni for an explanation – did he know the name when his team designed the car?

'We did not know the name,' says Manzoni. Would it have changed anything? 'No. There are no references to the Testarossa of the 1980s. We never follow a nostalgic approach. The internet has endless examples of reinterpretations of the cars of the past. But this is not design; this is a banal approach. Why should we repeat ourselves?'

Is there not a risk, though, that the name invites people to expect a rebooted '80s Testarossa; all mile-wide hips (for the mid-mounted radiators) side strakes (ditto) and *Miami Vice* cool?

'Maybe, yes, because some people don't have any imagination. I love the name, of course. But this doesn't mean that the form should be similar to the original. The designers of the Testarossa in the '80s did not look to the '50s for inspiration when they designed their car; they didn't think about the past.'

Every new Ferrari requires close collaboration between design and engineering. It's why Flavio founded Centro Stile; to achieve the required performance and beauty through close collaboration rather than compromise. But you get the sense the new Testarossa, like the SF90 XX before it, pushed his team to the limits.

'It was very difficult, particularly with the cooling, the aerodynamics and the new turbo system, which is much bigger than before,' explains Manzoni. 'Nevertheless, it's always a matter of how we are able to interpret the concept around these constraints. The more you know the constraints, the more you can imagine a form which is suitable.'

Overall the form is crisp, clean and vaguely geometric, contrasting with the softer, more organic SF90. The sports prototypes of the '70s were a heavy influence, as were jet fighters – you can see it in the black 'bands', inspired by jet engine intake nozzles, that denote the air intakes for the intercoolers, borrowed from the F80.

And if you spot a familial similarity with the F80 and the 12Cilindri… well, Manzoni's happy with that. 'There is a clear connection, and a shared design philosophy. I would say our design language is architectural, with a composition of volumes interlocked together. These designs are simple, not too complicated.'

Whereas what lies beneath undoubtedly is complicated… The Testarossa retains the SF90's three-motor plug-in hybrid powertrain, with two motors up front – one on each wheel – and a third in the rear, boosting the output of the twin-turbocharged V8 and, we're assured, eliminating turbo lag.

Power is up, to 1035bhp, but we're firmly into diminishing-returns territory here, as we were with the SF90 XX. The SF90's full system conjured 986bhp. The SF90 XX upped that by 30bhp to 1016bhp. The Testarossa finds another 19bhp from the engine, for 807bhp from the V8 and a system total of 1035bhp. Performance is shattering,

with 0-62mph dealt with in 2.25 seconds (quicker than both Lamborghini's Revuelto and Aston's heavier, much more expensive Valhalla) and 0-124mph in just 6.35sec. Top speed is 'in excess of 205mph'.

The engine gets a heap of new parts, including turbos, cylinder heads, block, exhaust manifolds and intake plenums, plus a full set of titanium fasteners, to offset the weight increases elsewhere and bring the Testarossa in at the same weight as the SF90: 1570kg (with the lightweight Assetto Fiorano pack, seen fitted in these images).

The hybrid system's unchanged, with the same 7.45kWh battery supplying juice to the same e-motors, though the Testarossa's smarter, faster-acting electronics allow the car to use more aggressive torque vectoring more of the time. Indeed, chief product development officer Gianmaria Fulgenzi goes so far as to suggest that from behind the wheel the system feels like a 300-350kg weight reduction, such is the increase in agility. Regenerative efficiency is also improved, Ferrari says, though the electric-only range remains unchanged at 16 miles.

It's the same story with the chassis – marginal gains to deliver a slight but quantifiable advantage over what came before. Around tight and twisty Fiorano, the Testarossa's 1.5sec faster than the previous car, albeit 0.2sec slower than the SF90 XX.

The suspension retains the same hardware but runs new calibration, for a three per cent increase in lateral performance and a 10 per cent reduction in roll. The braking system's been overhauled with new Brembo rear calipers, bigger vents for improved cooling and an upgraded version of Ferrari's ABS Evo system, which leans on the car's smarter new dynamic brain to optimise braking across all four wheels. Pedal feel is improved too, it's claimed, and in total the 6D brake-by-wire system increases the repeatability of peak braking performance and shortens the stopping distance 62-0mph by a metre. It all adds up, I guess.

The big news on the dynamics side is Maranello's latest baffling acronym, FIVE – Ferrari Integrated Vehicle Estimator.

'We developed this system for the F80, where the idea was to make driving with 1200bhp achievable for every kind of driver,' says Fulgenzi. 'In less than one millisecond the system can evaluate all the important dynamic parameters, including those that aren't directly measurable, such as yaw angle, and keep the car in perfect balance. It's an algorithm, accurate to less than 1km/h and less than 1° of yaw angle, that can precisely control the dynamics, making the car easier to drive – and faster.'

But what does that actually mean, ▶

0-62MPH IN 2.25 SECONDS IS QUICKER THAN BOTH LAMBORGHINI'S REVUELTO AND ASTON'S VALHALLA

Assetto Fiorano pack ups the visual aggression – and the actual aggression

Gianmaria? 'Imagine you are pushing like hell, hard on the gas pedal. With FIVE, the physical and mental effort is lower, because the system is able to create the perfect dynamic condition.

'It can read patterns in your driving, predict what the driver will ask for and prepare the system for these inputs. So you get the best performance but in control. And it feels natural. You really feel that it is you controlling the car; the electronics act very smoothly and very fast, and you don't feel any intrusion.'

The system is always on, regardless of drive mode, and could be the key to unlocking the driving enjoyment the SF90 struggled to reliably serve up, so busy was it blowing your socks off with brute force. Given the polish of Lamborghini's Revuelto and the playful biddability of Aston's Valhalla, let's hope so.

Open one of the elegantly hollowed-out doors (the vast ducts feed cooling air to

FERRARI
849
Testarossa

those greedy intercoolers) and you'll find an all-new interior with, Ferrari claims, the refinement to do GT duties as well as the supersport stuff, albeit with just 74 litres of storage space – 'Get a van for your baggage,' suggests chief marketing and commercial officer Enrico Galliera, possibly joking.

'At 50km/h you can be relaxed, chatting with your passenger, making a phone call,' says Fulgenzi. 'Then you push the gas pedal and you have a monster of a car capable of more than 1g of lateral acceleration.'

The big news is the cleaned-up driver interface, which promises to resolve what's been an Achilles' heel for Ferrari ever since the previous system arrived in the otherwise wonderful Roma. The main display has been simplified, a change it sorely needed, and a new steering wheel features a return to physical controls for many functions, including engine start – yep, the soulless haptic start button gives way to, um, a start button. Scenes of jubilation.

Fulgenzi: 'Finally, we introduce a new steering wheel with physical buttons, including the engine start button.' Continues Galliera: 'This was the strongest message from our clients – a return to a simple interaction to start the car.'

The cockpit may have been simplified but working out which 849 Testarossa you want is fiendishly complicated. The coupe and spider are available more or less simultaneously, and both can be had with or without the Assetto Fiorano pack (more money, less weight, more downforce). The pack shaves about 30kg through its extensive use of titanium and carbonfibre, including lightweight seats and 20-inch carbon wheels. You also get mini wings in place of the twin rear tails, uprated Multimatic dampers, Cup 2 tyres and bespoke liveries.

UK pricing is unconfirmed, but the price in euros conveys the general idea. Still, the fact that you could buy an actual '80s Testarossa together with a sensational 296 GTB for the same money as the new 849 is neither here nor there. For now, at least, this 21st century Testarossa is Maranello's series-production flagship, and that'll be draw enough for most. **car**

NEED TO KNOW | What is it? Successor to the SF90 Stradale, and Ferrari's flagship for the foreseeable **| Tech?** Gets next-gen HMI and FIVE smart stability control from the halo F80 hypercar – and an actual physical start button again **| Aimed at?** Horsepower addicts without the means or the client status for an F80 **| When can I have one?** Production begins Q2 2026 for the €460,000 (£398k) coupe, Q3 for the €500,000 (£433k) and 90kg heavier Spider. Assetto Fiorano pack is a €52,500 (£45.5k) option on both

Our cars

HELLO VOLVO EX30 + GOODBYE RENAULT SCENIC + DOG WALKING WITH OUR BMW M5

Boot is oddly small for this type of car

Barry Hayden

RENAULT SCENIC **MONTH 6**

Goodbye

Not retro. Just good

The Scenic may have an old name but it's pure 2025 family car, and all the better for it. By **Ben Whitworth**

The story so far

Sets a high bar for battery-powered family transport

+ Good range; engaging to drive; roomy and interesting cabin

- Firm ride; poor wet-weather traction; noise at higher speeds

Logbook

Price £45,495 (£46,745 as tested) **Performance** 87kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph **Efficiency** 4.2 miles per kWh (official), 3.8 miles (tested) **Range** 369 miles (official), 330 (tested) **Energy cost** 3.3p per mile **Miles this month** 1126 **Total miles** 6644

From day one, the Scenic's appeal has been its unfailing competence. Like its 1996 genre-defining forebear, it has stuck to its brief – provide affordable, spacious, well-equipped and comfortable family transport – now intelligently updated for our electric era. It hasn't tried to reinvent itself as a high-riding sports coupe or a pseudo-adventurer. It's just a thoroughly decent family car. And that's oddly rare.

It's only as it departs that I realise just how much I've grown to appreciate the Scenic. During the last six months it's repeatedly proved itself to be capable, dependable and quietly likeable. The kind of daily companion you appreciate once you've stopped expecting grand gestures and started valuing the small, everyday ones.

With its larger 87kWh battery, our Iconic Long Range model never struggled to meet and often exceeded the 300-mile mark between charges in real-world use – as these things go, not ridiculously far short of the 379-mile official range. That effectively silenced any lingering low-level hum of range anxiety, particularly on longer journeys that included trips from my home in Sussex to Birmingham, Oxford, Plymouth and Renault's EV HQ in Douai, France.

The generously proportioned cabin is a high point, balancing versatility, sound ergonomics and tactility. Its combination of different textures and fabrics has not lost its appeal, while the Google-based infotainment was faultless, the MyRenault app never sulked, and the photochromatic Solarbay roof was a hit with passengers. And a standing ovation, please, for the team behind the programmable physical button that hushes the more intrusive driver aids.

While space for people is generous, that's not so true for luggage. The deep underfloor boot compartment swallows charging cables neatly, but the main load space is limited by thickly padded sidewalls, and Renault's decision not to fit a sliding or reclining rear bench feels like an oversight in a car trading on versatility.

The Scenic's combination of quick steering, keen front end, impressive body control and low centre of gravity results in a family car that's keener to change direction than its silhouette might suggest. It's ▶

not that it encourages you to seek out challenging B-roads, but it behaves very impressively when you find yourself on one, with way more dynamism available than you'd expect from an electric family car.

The trade-off for that agility is ride quality that never fully settles, particularly at lower speeds, where it fidgets and thumps over imperfections, making it less soothing than it ought to be, given its family remit. Wind and road noise at motorway pace is also noticeable. Neither trait is a deal-breaker, but both take a little shine off what is otherwise an engaging driving experience.

In its time with us the Scenic easily accomplished everything from short school runs to family holidays without forcing us to adapt our habits to suit the car – arguably the greatest compliment you can give any daily EV. Plumper low-speed ride quality, a dash more packaging intelligence, a better choice of tyres and quieter cruising manners would be on our fix-it list for its refresh.

The Scenic is one reason why Renault has achieved the seemingly impossible. At the start of 2020 it posted losses of £6.6 billion. Yet Renault is now flourishing, thanks in part to a successful two-pronged EV approach – a modern range of accomplished and affordable family cars spearheaded by the Scenic, and a line-up of retro-inspired models like the 4, 5 and upcoming Twingo that combine advanced technology and heritage to intelligently sidestep pastiche. Driving our Scenic back-to-back with a 4 illuminates the similarities and differences of these two branches of the EV family.

The 4 rides and handles with a polished sophistication that's initially at slight odds with its distinctive period lines. Body control is very good, the steering is precise and well-weighted, step-off is peppy, as is the in-gear acceleration – in everyday driving conditions it comes across as a thoroughly well-sorted and composed package. And with such a likeable character, too.

Much like the Scenic. It doesn't dazzle with radical styling or wild acceleration. It achieves something arguably more impressive – it works in all the ways you need it to, and in most of the ways you'd like it to, making the challenging transition to electric family motoring feel entirely natural. Like the 4, it's a winner.

Renault is miraculously now flourishing, with a successful two-pronged EV approach

Count the cost

Cost new £46,745 **Used value** £29,600 **Cost per mile** 3.3p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.31

It may not look like the old Scenic, but it does the same job

POLESTAR 4
MONTH 2

If it ain't broke

The engineers wanted the Polestar 4 to channel the feeling of being in a thick, pine-covered forest, so its indicator sounds like the fresh snap of a twig on a dewy Swedish morning.

A dusting of new, pure snow. Sharp, clean air filling my lungs. Perhaps even a glimpse of a young reindeer wobbling through the tundra. Poetic, but absurd when you take the idea out of the design studio and onto the A406. There, it's impossible to hear – even the speed-limit notification bongs and 'you forgot your phone' bleeps are more prominent.

I came across a superior solution in a Volvo estate I drove recently. Its indicator click is aggressive and loud enough to cut through engine noise or the whoosh of the air-con. That estate was a Volvo 240 from 1989. So much for progress.

CURTIS MOLDRICH

The story so far

Polestar steps well out of Volvo's shadow with its own fastback

+ Fantastic design; supercar speed; some cutting-edge tech

- Software niggles; ADAS issues

Logbook

Price £66,990 (£75,290 as tested) **Performance** 94kWh battery, 536bhp, 506lb ft, 3.7sec 0-62mph, 124mph **Efficiency** 2.9-3.3 miles per kWh (official), 3.2 miles per kWh (tested) **Range** 367 miles (official), 229 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 12.0p per mile **Miles this month** 734 **Total miles** 1974

VW GOLF GTI
MONTH 3

Humans now welcome

I'm getting on well with the facelifted Golf's revised infotainment, which replaces infuriating touch-sensitive steering-wheel controls with physical buttons, and has temperature adjusters that can be seen at night.

The new 12.9-inch screen is easy to navigate, with a shortcut to knock off the lane-keeping assist, and a car-shaped graphic that fast-tracks you to previously buried functions, such as the ESP Sport mode.

Infotainment foibles aren't all gone. Volume controls on the steering wheel don't work when the ignition's on but the engine off; touch-sensitive drive mode and assist shortcuts are right next to the hazard warning lights; and the voice control is inconsistent. But it no longer seems to want to obstruct me, which is progress.

BEN BARRY

The story so far

Weekday usability and weekend fun, in classic hot Golf style

+ Clubsport returns with more attitude than the regular GTI and less cost than the R

- A bit more power would be nice

Logbook

Price £43,215 (£47,830 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 296bhp, 295lb ft, 5.6sec 0-62mph, 168mph **Efficiency** 37.4mpg (official), 37.4mpg (tested), 168g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 16.4p per mile **Miles this month** 1190 **Total miles** 3212

INEOS GRENADIER
MONTH 3

For farmers? Forget it

I know a few farmers, and none of them drives a Grenadier. Everyone who sees our car is impressed but the conversation quickly turns to costs. In 2017 Ineos was aiming for sub-£50k but that inflated when ambitions hit reality. Then there's the VAT, always a hot topic for farmers. The original Utility had aluminium rear panels, but it was only in 2024 that Ineos launched a version with blacked-out rear windows.

The current Grenadier Commercial meets the criteria for being taxed as a commercial vehicle in the UK, but the Quartermaster pick-up doesn't qualify (because the payload is under 1000kg); Ineos missed a trick. A used Mitsubishi L200 remains the farmer's favourite working vehicle – the Grenadier may as well be a Range Rover as far as they're concerned.

MARK WALTON

The story so far

Grenadier is a rare sight on our roads and our farms, through no fault of the car's

+ Tough enough for real work

- But too costly for real workers

Logbook

Price £69,995 (£73,943 as tested) **Performance** 2993cc turbodiesel six-cylinder, eight-speed automatic, all-wheel drive, 246bhp, 406lb ft, 9.9sec 0-62mph, 99mph **Efficiency** 23.1-26.9mpg (official), 22.8mpg (tested), 276-319g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 27.4p per mile **Miles this month** 697 **Total miles** 3665

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R
MONTH 4

An idea to shelve

For me, Honda is synonymous with over-engineering. When its motorcycles were plagued with camchain issues in the '80s, it solved the problem with gear-driven camshafts – a laudably over-the-top solution.

Regrettably, the Civic Type R's parcel shelf isn't very Honda. A parcel shelf has three jobs: reduce tyre roar; hide the contents of your boot; and be a shelf for clothes you're trying to keep smooth, like suits and dresses.

The Civic's parcel 'shelf' is a retractable strip of fabric that hooks to the far side of the boot. It scores highly if you're Honda (it's light and cheap) but poorly by my metrics, managing only to screen the contents of the boot. Road noise goes through it like Tool through earplugs and it can't hold anything heavier than a cravat.

BEN MILLER

The story so far

Arguably the finest hot hatch on sale

+ Sweet manual 'box; the state of the front-wheel-drive art

- More focused than the car that came before

Logbook

Price £51,905 (£52,605 as tested) **Performance** 1996cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 325bhp, 310lb ft, 5.5sec 0-62mph, 171mph **Efficiency** 34.3mpg (official), 33.9mpg (tested), 186g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 19.5p per mile **Miles this month** 539 **Total miles** 3269

BMW M5 TOURING MONTH 2

Unrivalled pedigree

The dog's nice enough, but the car's pretty amazing. Is there nothing the M5 Touring can't do? By **Piers Ward**

The story so far

M5 Touring does all the boring stuff really well but ups the fun factor when required

+ Incredible blend of practicality and pace, with a dog-friendly boot space

- UK parking spaces aren't made for it; that cornering ability isn't dog-friendly

Logbook

Price £113,605 (£133,858 as tested) **Performance** 18.6kWh battery, 4395cc 32v twin-turbo V8 petrol plus e-motor, 717bhp, 738lb ft **Efficiency** 148-176mpg (official), 28.3mpg (tested), 37-39g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 35p per mile **Miles this month** 1269 **Total miles** 4272

This doesn't need overthinking. We have a dog, Bala, that requires a huge amount of exercise (life tip – do NOT get a cocker spaniel) and a BMW M5 Touring that demands to be used properly. Why not combine the two?

So the aim is to go for a great drive that will enable the dog to have a great walk. This involves a three-hour drive, but it should be worth it, because the destination is one of *CAR*'s favourite sections of road – Blakey Ridge in North Yorkshire. It's a great part of the world for dogs as well as drivers.

Bala is primed like a coiled spring so I need to get her dog box into the boot. The hybrid M5's boot is 500 litres, which is great for day-to-day use but not optimal for a spaniel-friendly dog crate. The car's sloping back means the box has to go cross ways, which is fine for this journey because it's just Bala and me, but if it was a family outing then we'd be struggling to pack all our clobber in. In our family X5 the crate can go in lengthways, freeing up much more room around it.

Still, Bala is comfortable, so I point the M5's nose north. This is where the sensible side of the M5's personality shines through. At a steady cruise we hit 33mpg, which isn't bad for a heavy, powerful estate car.

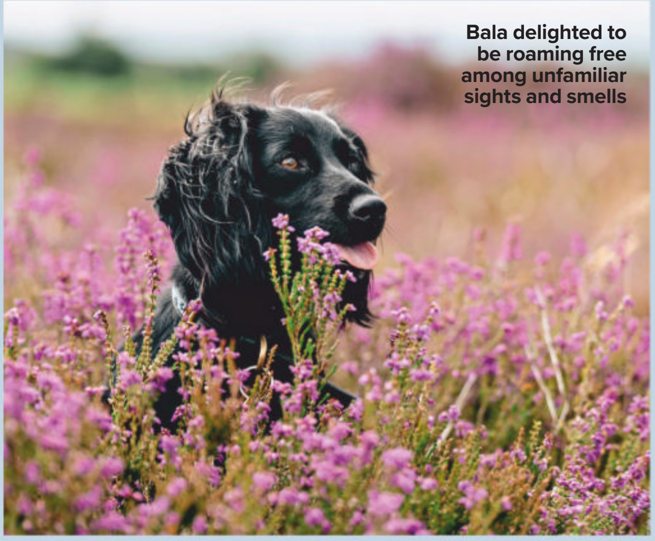
BMW claims 37-41 miles of EV-only running in the M5, with its 18.6kWh battery, but I rarely get to enjoy that. Near the start of so many of my journeys I pull on to the A1 from a short slip road, where you need everything on and maxed, a manoeuvre that deploys some of that charge, meaning it won't be available later for electric-only cruising.

I generally have the car set up to start in Hybrid mode, which ensures it's ready to engage both the V8 and EV powertrains when needed. I have, however, experimentally set it to default to electric-only, and on those occasions it's given me about 40 hushed miles. Not bad.

This journey comes to life when we peel off the A1, once we're past York. Even though it's morning rush hour, the traffic is minimal as we hit the smaller roads around Pickering and Kirkbymoorside, then towns become villages as we approach our destination. We clear Hutton-le-Hole, looking for all the world like a scene from ▶

What a lovely place. But please don't all move there

Jordan Butters



Bala delighted to be roaming free among unfamiliar sights and smells

one of James Herriot's books, hit a cattle grid and then there it is – Blakey Road. Open tarmac stretches away, sheep loiter by the roadside, and pink heather carpets the surrounding hills.

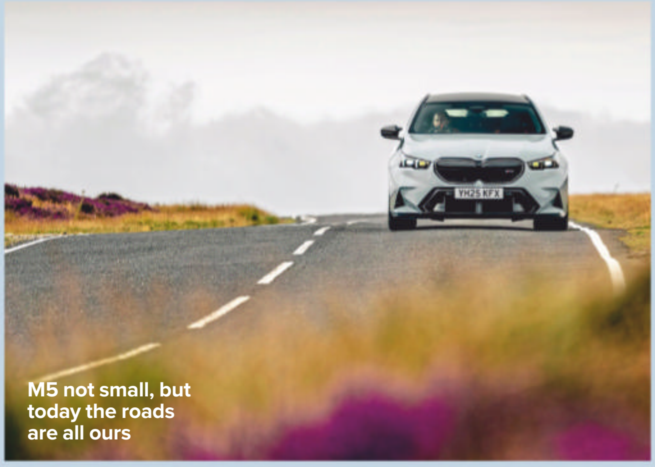
This feels, refreshingly, like a long way from home. The phone signal dies to nothing and traffic is sparse, and for once the weather in the North York Moors is being kind. Tempting as it is to see if the M5 can flourish on this tarmac, Bala has started to whine from the back – and if there's one sure way to shatter the mood, it'll be clearing up after her.

Gravel crunches under tyre as we pull into the car park of the Lion Inn at the top of the ridge. There are bus loads of schoolkids here today for a 'Let's Learn Moor' day (see what they did there?) but it's easy to get away from that hubbub.

We set off down the hill, and because the summer's been so dry there's no squelching underfoot, just a crackle of dead vegetation from the parched earth. 'Extreme fire risk' signs adorn the fence posts. Bala is not concerned, immediately adopting full spaniel mode, covering vast distances with her nose pinned to the ground.

There's no sound, save for her panting and the odd tweet of a nearby bird. Suddenly, Bala works out that those birds are nesting nearby and she becomes very interested in finding out exactly where they are. Better head back before we obliterate the next generation of meadow pipits.

Bala safely back in the boot, it's time to enjoy the drive home. But first, a bit of fiddling. You can select from five modes for the hybrid system, and there are three within the M mode button on the centre dash to change the display: Sport kills the speed bong, Track does the same to the infotainment screen. There are also two M buttons on the steering wheel for setting 11 parameters, and there are Comfort, Sport and Sport Plus modes. The Boost paddle to the left of the steering wheel gives ALL THE POWER for a short burst, which is highly amusing once and has never been used since.



M5 not small, but today the roads are all ours

You want to bring your A-game when there's 717bhp to play with on these moorland roads

I tend to rely on just the M2 button on the steering wheel. I've programmed this to be Sport for most things but Comfort for the suspension, and two-wheel drive. Why BMW's engineers wanted so many forms of adjustment when one will do baffles me.

All the more so because when you press that single button, it's simply brilliant. The M5 is hardly dull in any normal mode, save for sluggish V8 engagement after EV-only running, and sticking it in rear-wheel drive reveals hidden depths that really shouldn't be possible in a car this practical.

Knowing it's such a good performance car, you want to bring your A-game to avoid any embarrassment. There's 717bhp to play with on these moorland roads, with their excellent visibility and rhythmic flow across the landscape, and it's easy to get suckered in.

A tighter corner approaches and the M5 is masterful. All of a sudden the stiff rear suspension yields results, keeping the body movement under control and giving you confidence. Third gear, 5000rpm, lean into the steering and tyres, squeeze the throttle pressure like a rifle trigger – the rear squirms under the load, not WRC-style, but with enough movement that it feels interesting.

The details live with you, like the rubber stipples on the back of the gearshift paddles that give a bit more tactility and a bit more grip. The same for the seats in their orange hue – support and comfort in all the right places.

Or the way that you need to remember to shift up when the revcounter starts to turn yellow, because if you wait you'll hit the hard limiter and the sense of never-ending surge stops suddenly.

Pause. Breath. Knock the pace back a bit and let the 738lb ft of torque do the work before winding the car up again as we hit the last set of corners, then ease off again for fear of upsetting the dog.

The car has been mighty, giving me both an adrenaline rush and a sense of tranquillity – is there a car that's better at ticking those boxes, and taking your dog to places they wouldn't otherwise be able to enjoy? I can't think of one.

Not the roomiest boot, but fine for one man and his dog

These are matched on performance and price – but which is the better car?

Twin test

SKODA SUPERB MONTH 6

Big fish, smaller pond

Our Superb battles one its few remaining true rivals. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

On list price, few non-SUVs can really compete with our Superb – bar one...

+ Our Skoda trumps the V60 on space, kit and comfort

- The Volvo's auto is much quicker; it also looks smarter and feels plusher inside

Logbook

Price £44,820 (£46,110 as tested) **Performance** 1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, 190bhp, 295lb ft, 7.5sec 0-62mph, 148mph **Efficiency** 46.7mpg (official), 45.0mpg (tested) **Energy cost** 14.3p per mile **Miles this month** 995 **Total miles** 7113

Not a hybrid or EV, and not an SUV. Quite a few of us are still in the market for a family car that ticks none of those boxes, but there are very few options available to us. It's a thought that's rattled around in my head ever since the Superb first parked itself on my driveway. It's a car that stubbornly, proudly, sits in a long-established pigeonhole, staying put while others flee.

The Superb still does have a few competitors, though. BMW's 3-series Touring and Audi's A5 Avant are within the same solar system. Its non-identical twin, the VW Passat, is an option, too. But these don't come close to the Superb in many areas.

Yes, we at *CAR* frequently declare the 3-series Touring to be all the car you'd ever need... because it is. However, I'll argue until I'm blue in the face that it falls short of the Superb in a couple of key areas: it's nowhere near as spacious, nor is it as sedate and calming as a long-distance cruiser.

Audi and VW, meanwhile, have gone down the tech overload route with their interiors – alienating those with common sense about how they like a cabin to be arranged.

That only leaves one real competitor: the Volvo V60. It's not an SUV and is still powered by an engine – albeit one that sips from the green pump rather than the black one, and has a little bit of electric assistance via a mild hybrid system in the B4 spec you see in these pictures.

But there's more to it than that. This V60's 0-62mph time is very similar to my Superb's,

and at 44.8mpg its official combined fuel economy is not too dissimilar. The list price is close, too, with a V60 B4 Plus starting from £43,940 at the time of writing. If you're after a monthly deal, the cheapest we could find via Leasing.com (with the same parameters for both cars: three years, 10,000 miles a year), puts the Superb at £476 per month and the Volvo £526. Competitive, then, and it puts the V60 in a good place even before I get in the car and begin comparing.

The Volvo immediately gains an advantage due to how it looks, I'd say. Like most modern Volvos, the V60 still retains a bit of Scandi cool despite this being a car that's now six years old, and in fact was recently resurrected after being briefly killed off in the UK in the summer of 2023. Think of it as timeless. The red paint adds to the Volvo's appeal but, annoyingly, you can't order it any more. Instead you're restricted to a choice of varying shades of Scandi-noir thriller.

Skoda can do better on the colour front, with block red and blue options and a weird light metallic green. Of course, mine is Uber-spec grey, which would usually allow a car to show off all of its crisp lines. The issue, as discussed previously, is that this generation of Superb simply isn't as clean cut and neatly tailored as the previous generation. The grille gives it a bit of a piggish nose, and you'd be forgiven for thinking this was an old Vauxhall Insignia estate if seeing it from a distance. Not something to be proud of.

Inside, the Superb wins the usefulness contest by a country mile. As well as those clever, versatile Smart Dials, the storage areas all around the cabin are generally larger and the seats are impeccably comfortable – thickly padded, upholstered in durable leather and immensely adjustable.

The Volvo's gearshifts are silky smooth, and the whole car feels a lot more reactive to your inputs

The Volvo's Google-based infotainment system is generally harder to navigate, with slightly vague menus and not all that much guidance as to where everything is. Multi-use buttons on the steering wheel don't always make it clear what they do, either.

But I must admit the V60's general interior ambience feels that little bit sweeter; the door handles are much more solid, that Orrefors crystal gear selector is still a lovely 'surprise and delight' feature all these years after Volvo started using it, and many of the materials have a smidge more satisfying tactility to them.

The Superb interior's trump card is that its rear legroom is imperious compared to the V60's, and the boot is around 180 litres bigger from floor to parcel shelf. It's a larger car, inside and out, for similar money, and that extra size is well used.

That said, I am a little envious of the in-built luggage separator in the V60, which can help stop your groceries from rolling around. Hooks and a luggage net in the Skoda are useful, but not as much.

On the road, neither is trying to be wildly exciting. Both feel solid, dependable and refined but there are some crucial differences. I'd say the Superb wins out when it comes to ride quality; it's not that the V60 is harsh, but it is firm and is more inclined to get unsettled at low speeds than the Skoda.

The two engines are about as loud as each other, with the ▶

Volvo can keep up thanks to un-slow auto

Rich Pearce

Feels plush in here, but Skoda's seats are better

I'm drawn to the Volvo for its presence and interior feel. It's a well put together bit of kit

V60's mild hybrid petrol sounding raspier than the gravelly diesel Superb, and in normal driving they're about as brisk as each other.

Sampling the Volvo emphasises the flaw in the Skoda's driving experience: the automatic transmission. The shifts are fine when you're on the move, but it's frustratingly slow to engage gear when you're preparing to pull away from a standstill. If you're hoping to take advantage of a gap in the traffic on a roundabout, it had better be a big gap.

It's doubtless engineered-in to improve fuel economy, but it's very annoying, and casts a pall of lethargy over what is otherwise a perfectly sprightly family estate, albeit one that doesn't have oodles of power.

The Volvo, no doubt helped by the extra e-boost from the mild hybrid system, doesn't have this problem; the shifts are silky smooth and the whole car is a lot more reactive to your inputs off the line. I don't particularly like the steering, though; it's a little over-sensitive, and turning actions can feel a bit like stirring a big pot of PVA glue.

So which wins? I can't help but be drawn to the Volvo for its presence and interior feel, not to mention an automatic gearbox that isn't connected via dial-up. Even though it's been around for years, it still feels like a properly well put together bit of kit. But, after having done long drives in both, I'd still take the Skoda. It's much more settled on a big trip, with sweeter ride quality and much more comfortable seats. For broadly the same money as the Volvo, the Skoda gives you more luxuries, features and smart details as well as simply being a roomier car.

But we should be happy the V60 still exists, having benefitted from Volvo's defibrillator. I can now see why it's so well admired and respected in many circles, just as the Superb is.

V60's luggage divider triggers instant envy

Small crossover EV couldn't be more on-trend

Hello

VOLVO EX30 MONTH 1

No box goes unticked

Electric? Check. Crossover? Yep. Premium badge? Sure. By **Tim Pollard**

The story so far

The smallest electric Volvo joins the *CAR* long-term fleet

+ Neat looks; punchy performance; decent range

- Digital complications

Logbook

Price £39,860 (£39,860 as tested) **Performance** 64kWh battery, e-motor, 268bhp, 5.3sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.1 (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 296 miles (official), 198 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 8.3p per mile **Miles this month** 247 **Total miles** 623

The Volvo car range seems to yo-yo rather a lot these days. Estate cars were the staple of the brand for decades, but were dramatically pulled from UK sale in summer 2023 – only for a U-turn a year later re-releasing V60 and V90 wagons back to these shores. Estates are, however, still marginalised by a stream of crossovers, many of them electric, dominating the new-product pipeline, and it's one of those electric crossovers that joins the *CAR* long-term test fleet this month.

The EX30 is an easy car to decode, using Volvo's simple nomenclature: E denotes electric, X means crossover and 30 signals the size, slotting below the XC40/EX40/EC40 trio. Think of it as a rival to the Hyundai Kona, Jeep Avenger and Renault Megane E-Tech.

It's the firm's lowest-price EV and I'm impressed that Volvo can sell you an EX30 from just £31,560, with the current £1500 discount applied. That's Volvo's own EV grant, as the car failed to qualify for the UK government's Byzantine discounts announced this summer. We reckon that's a keen price for a small premium battery crossover with a Volvo badge, although it's worth noting that our Extended Range model costs £4200 more to secure the bigger 64kWh battery over the standard 49kWh pack.

We've plumped for the mid-ranking Plus trim. It adds £2100 to the price of the entry-level Core, bringing niceties such as a Harman Kardon stereo, powered tailgate, interior illumination package and air quality measuring.

Our car comes in Vapour Grey – one of the standard colours that doesn't cost any extra, lending a matt, flat, pencil colour to the chunky crossover silhouette. To these eyes it's a neat-looking car with a strong stance on its 19-inch wheels, though I sometimes wonder why I didn't pick a brighter hue.

First impressions are of a capable and well-built electric car with a decent range between charges that should suit my lifestyle. The claimed 296 miles of range translates to a more likely 200 in the real world, based on my first few days of ownership. Finding the right-size battery for your needs is fast becoming a crucial car-buying skill and I guess I do miss the long-legged range of my old VW ID. 7 (with a 77kWh battery and 250-mile real-world range), but I'm encouraged that the Volvo will take on 153kW at a fast charger for when I need to top up on the fly. We'll be testing the energy efficiency and charging rates in the months ahead.

Performance from our Single Motor Extended Range model is certainly brisk: I'd question the need for the Twin Motor, as our cheaper model will scamper from zero to 62mph in just 5.3 seconds. Will we be as quick to adapt to the touchscreen, which controls so much minor functionality in the EX30? Stay tuned as we uncover the Volvo's abilities and annoyances.

Lee Brimble

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Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

Three of our fave hot hatches are all-wheel drive

1

GIANT TEST WINNER

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions now over £60k, although it starts at £46,045

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

2

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal car

THE BAD: £51,905 for a front-drive hatch with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Honda says it's the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: Keep it basic; Ultimate Edition for £58k is just cosmetic upgrades

3

VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

4

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

Carrera S always a strong selling 911

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and GTS version integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; the most basic 911 is now priced in six figures in the UK, at £103,700

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD:
A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY:
Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD:
Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; a boringly obvious choice (but not one bit boring to drive)

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eyeore

THE ONE TO BUY:
GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75,300

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD:
The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY:
Line-up now consists of Turbo, Turbo SE (both with AMG four-cylinder) and Toyota-engined V6

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD: The perfect antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: R is 34kg lighter, which can't have been easy, but also more than £90k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY:
A110 S adds handling poise for £68,170 but £55,160 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; classic ideas adapted for 2025

THE BAD: If only the roads had classic emptiness

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

FERRARI 12CILINDRI

THE GOOD: Wonderful performance; full of feel; looks and sounds great, even on a rainy day

THE BAD: It's awfully wide; some of the cabin tech is fiddly, although Ferrari seems to be over the worst

THE UGLY: Just the price

THE ONE TO BUY: £339,245 for the coupe; £366,500 for the Spider

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised version has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £99,200, and range hits £165k

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Easy to enjoy; glorious cabin; comfortable ride quality

THE BAD: Just that bit too heavy and brutish for some tastes

THE UGLY: CarPlay Ultra feels like a dubious addition

THE ONE TO BUY: £330,000 for the coupe, or about another £30k for the rather fine Volante

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £68,795 to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE ROADSTER

THE GOOD: Glorious V8 engine, wonderful body, superb handling

THE BAD: Boot shrinks compared to the coupe

THE UGLY: Cabin is better than before, but at this price you'd want it to be Bentley standard

THE ONE TO BUY: £175,000 for the Roadster is about £10k more than the hardtop

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL was developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £153k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you might not fit, especially in the metal-roofed RF

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 starts at £28k, 2.0 in Homura spec brings LSD for £35,515

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI F80

THE GOOD: Ferrari's fastest, cleverest, most polished circuit car yet, a once-in-a-decade masterclass

THE BAD: That phenomenal performance can seem a bit much for road use

THE UGLY: €3.5 million may be academic but it's still a lot

THE ONE TO BUY: All 799 have been sold, so good luck with that

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed over the Aventador

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one

MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Interior is dowdy next to Ford's Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,565, and there's currently a zero per cent finance offer

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space, so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,985

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TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

An EV that makes every trip just that bit happier

RENAULT 4

THE GOOD: All the joyfulness and fun of the 5, but now with added practicality… just like the old 4

THE BAD: Some minor annoyance with the fiddly drive selector

THE UGLY: Where the 5 is a sensationally adept modern recreation of the look and feel of the original, the new 4 is a bit generic to look at

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £26,995, which is very hard to argue with. Mechanically just the one version for now, but a healthy amount of choice, trim and options

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £21,495 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno and the bigger battery

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Priced from £88,200 for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUVS/CROSSOVERS

Who knew what an amazing sales success this Defender would be?

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot is an phenomenon, bringing dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the rumoured return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: EV starts at £68,500 and rises to £96,900 for the Turbo; £71,200 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 is around £210k; S coming soon

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but expensive at £154,870 (although the AMG's more)

5

FORD RANGER

THE GOOD: New PHEV removes any doubt: this is a great pick-up – good to drive and good value

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't huge; load space is trimmed a little by the hybrid hardware

THE UGLY: It's a big, heavy car if you're only using it for shopping

THE ONE TO BUY: Top-spec Stormtrak trim brings useful extra features, for £59,760

TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable. An EV version will turn up soon-ish

THE BAD: Doubts about reliability won't go away. It's heavy even before it goes EV

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £108,775), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: It's all a bit oligarchy

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order, so many owners pay much more

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £226,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best: £119,370 in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: Black Badge version keeps what's good about the regular Spectre but adds an extra level of dynamism. Also, of course, a bit more expense

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £53,185 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start at £18,970

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP deals are very tempting

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,005 for the hatch

AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin, decent range and quick charging

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £70,740 rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

1

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: £32,290 mild-hybrid front-drive 120 or £44,925 all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; both good, but on the big and heavy side

2

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: From £20,245, but £27,045 GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at £29,100

4

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £28,715; roomy estate is also great value

5

FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD: Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid version starts at a keen £18,035, but EV entry price of £21k is appealing too

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £91,865; saloon is £89,635– both quite steep

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

2

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both £193,525, one with more black trim

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not *that* clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,605 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

4

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, rarity value, fantastic agility and almost as good as a BMW M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £86,885

5

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £89,400 gets you in; Turbo E-Hybrid at £151,500 now tops the range

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Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.3 - 342.9 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at September 2025.